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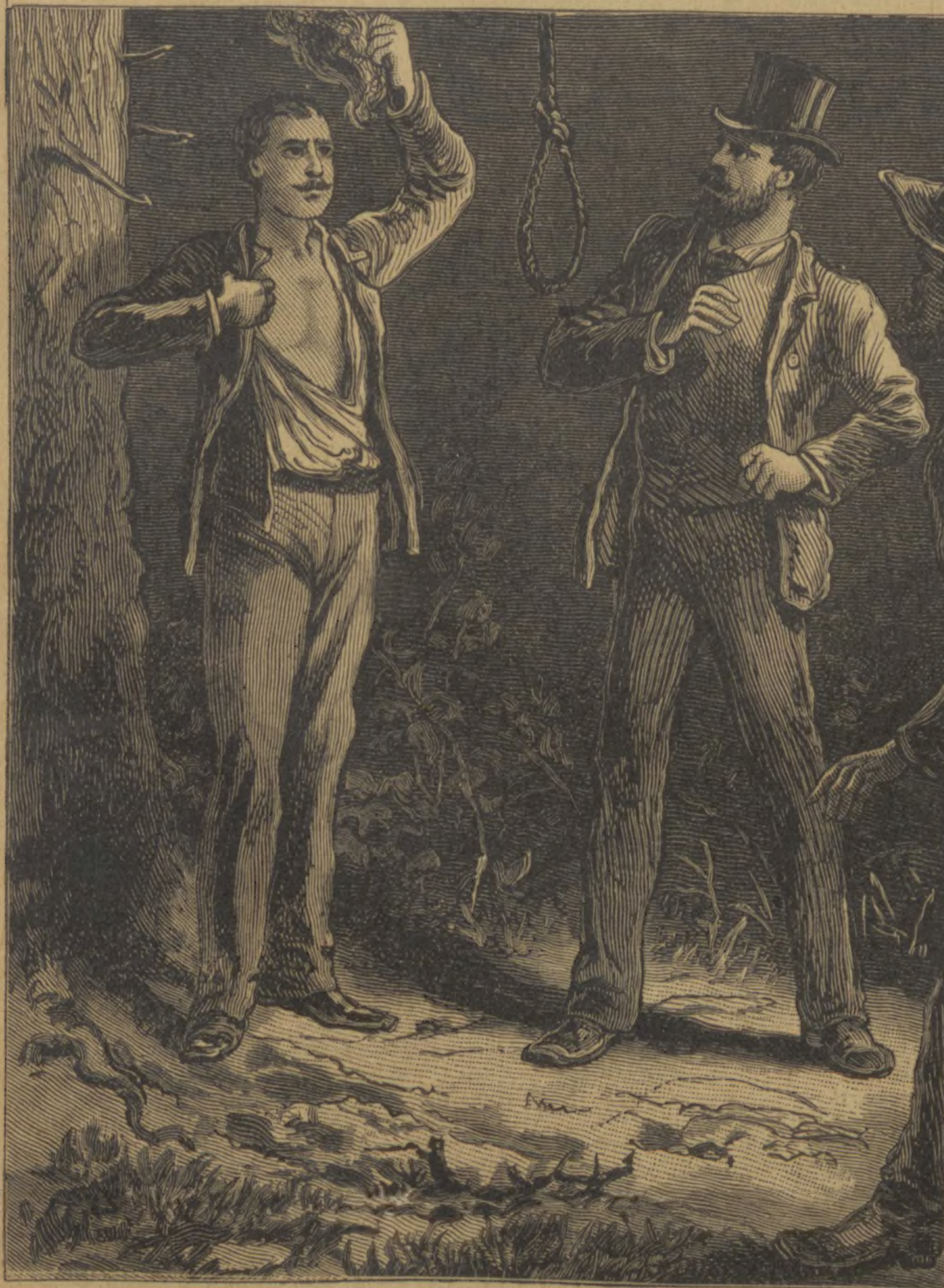
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The Girl Sport-Shadower



SPRINGING FROM UNDER THE NOOSE, CLARK FACED THEM ALL.



OR, Clark's Close Shave.

[A STORY OF THE
Vigilantes' Chief at Touch-and-Go.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FIGHT IN THE STORM.

"Oh! heavens! Must I die?"
The snow lay white on the mountains, and
the wind swept its icy breath over the al-

most obliterated trail. For a person to be lost on the hillside at night, in such a pitiless storm, was to confront certain death. Scarce to be wondered, then, that the speaker felt the agony of despair.

As he staggered and nearly fell, he uttered that exclamation; but, a moment later, his teeth were set, with a new purpose, and he reeled onward once more, shaking his almost palsied hand at the round glow in the heavens which showed where the moon was vainly trying to peer through the murky clouds.

"No, I will not die; not while Muriel is unavenged, and a single man of the Sacred Seven lives and laughs! Let him laugh best who laughs last! Has the wind changed, or have I been turned around in the blizzard? If I only knew. Touch-and-Go must lie somewhere yonder, and not so many miles away. I can reach it, and I will! Yet before this I should have been descending the mountain. Strange I should feel so drowsy."

It was not strange.

Clarence Clark was even then nearer to death's door than he knew, in spite of his resolute vow to live and be avenged. The acute suffering of the last hour was passing away, but, in its place was coming an apathy a thousand times worse.

He had started that afternoon to go from Walnut Bar to Touch-and-Go, had been overtaken by a snow storm, turned from the true course, and now was wandering forward on a path where every step was taking him farther from his destination, and into a region where he was less and less likely to meet with help.

Even as he spoke he felt his limbs totter under him, and then he sank almost helpless on the snow-covered ground.

But, brave man that he was, at that last crisis he did not think of giving up the fight, and once on the ground it seemed to him that he must take a few minutes of rest for which his soul was crying.

He huddled himself together at the foot of a pine, and the air suddenly filled with grateful warmth. The biting wind no longer reached him; the snow was soft as down! He made a pillow of the trunk of the tree, hard though it was, and closed his eyes.

He was slipping away into the dream-land from which no excursionist ever returns, when his consciousness flashed back with tenfold power; he recognized his danger for the instant, and uttered one wild cry, which rose shrill and high above the roaring of the storm.

It was a last flash of the life-fire, for almost before the echo had died away he was once more voiceless and numb. He folded his arms, closed his eyelids, and heard no longer the howling wind, which came racing up to the mountain crest with more power than ever.

For some little time he lay thus, and his breath came more and more gently. The snow drifted and sifted up against him. Death was very near.

For all he could have told, hours might have elapsed, though, in reality, but a few minutes had passed. Then—he was no longer alone!

From out of the pines which bordered the side of the almost hidden trail, two figures came bursting, and one of them halted almost by the side of the one crouching beneath the pine.

"I see nothing, and yet from the sound it must have been near here. Perhaps he has fallen into the gorge, and that was his last scream!"

"Wait! Here are the signs of tracks, if I mistake not, and, see! they come

this way. Ah, look! He is there! Have we come in time?"

The second speaker pointed to the half-hidden heap at the foot of the tree, and the two sprung together to see what was their find.

"He still lives," muttered one of the two, with his hand on the heart of the silent man.

"We may be too late, but we can at least make an effort. Here! Up with you! It is death to lie there another minute!"

As he spoke he caught the wayfarer by the collar, and with a rude wrench brought him to his feet.

This rough attack had its effect, slight though it was. A mumble came from the lips, a slight motion from the arm; but it was like an expiring flicker. Had the stranger released his grip the figure would have collapsed once more.

"Do not waste time, Ralph! We must carry him to the hut over at the gorge. He is too far gone to help himself."

The speaker was the smaller of the two rescuers, and though a heavy cloak disguised her sex, the voice was that of a woman.

Ralph shook his head.

"He is too far gone for that. He will die in another five minutes unless he is aroused now. Cut me a stick. He must be brought to his senses."

The suggestion was the best possible for the occasion, and the girl recognized its wisdom. With the knife she drew from the girdle at her waist she lopped off a straight bough from a near-by birch and rapidly cleared it of twigs, after which she placed it in the hands of her companion.

Then ensued a singular scene.

Holding the benumbed man with one powerful hand, with the other the cruel friend plied the whip with biting vigor.

"Crack! crack!" the wiry switch fell, lithely wrapping around arms and legs, and touching, with tingling force, back and shoulders. Steadily and mercilessly it fell, until the death-apathy began to succumb. The lad—for he was little more—began to writhe under the blows, and his tongue at last found speech.

"Hands off, I tell you! You're killing me!" and his hand began to fumble at his waist. Strength was returning, and his first movement would have been to defend himself against the man who was saving him.

"You would fight, would you? Ha! that's good! Now, a little larger dose of birch, and then perhaps you will be ready to move. No. You are not a safe young man to trust with such things. I'll take care of it for you, for the present."

Dexterously the speaker twitched the revolver from the rapidly warming fingers, and then went on with the castigation. The blows continued, and by and by the expostulation became something like screams. The tough whip had done its work, and then it was tossed away.

"All right, young man! I guess you are safe enough now, with a little looking after. You feel strong, but a minute or two by yourself and you would be back again where we found you. Come! We will help you over the rough places, but you have got to help yourself. Brace up and trot along!"

"Where are you taking me?"

"There is shelter not far away—an abandoned cabin. You will be out of the storm there, and it will take but a few moments to start a fire. Now, then lean on me! You are not half so strong as you think, and if you were out from under the trees the wind would chill you in a minute. Come on, Madge!"

The girl stepped to his other side, and with the rescued youth between them, the pair moved back under the pines.

The way grew rougher. Fortunately they had not far to go. Only one well acquainted with the route could have found it in the darkness, and the youth began to lose rapidly the strength which had come back to him under the rod. Ralph rather more than half carried him, and he sunk down with a sigh of relief the moment the sustaining arm was unclasped from around him.

Around was dense darkness, but in a brief time there was a faint glow, soon to be followed by a leaping flame, as a fire was started in the fireplace at one end of the cabin with the dry wood found therein.

"Safe at last!" exclaimed the man, as a cheerful warmth began to diffuse itself through the room.

"Lucky it was that Madge fancied she heard your cry. Another five minutes and you would have been gone. Who are you, and how did you come to be lost in this storm?"

"Did I scream?"

"You did, for a fact, and you may thank your lucky stars that you did so. It was Madge's sharp ears which heard you. If I had not believed in them I never would have gone out into the night."

"Thanks, then, to both of you, and especially to Madge, as you call her. I believe I dare answer your questions truthfully, and I would not like to lie to one who has just saved my life. My name is Clarence Clark. I left Walnut Bar on foot, intending to take a short cut I was told of, and strike the main trail somewhere half way up the mountain. They warned me of danger from a blizzard, but I did not believe. Then the storm came. I lost my way altogether, wandered on until I sank down for a little rest. What else there is to tell you know as well as I."

"When you were warned of danger, it was strange you did not at least keep to the main trail. You could save but a few miles by the cut-off."

Clarence Clark looked up keenly at his questioner, whose features at that moment were brought out in strong relief by the roaring fire.

He saw a dark, handsome face, with coal-black eyes, long, midnight hair, and an aquiline nose. But, beyond all, there was an expression in the face which seemed to say that this stranger to him was one to trust.

"To tell the truth, I took the route because I had certain reasons for avoiding a man who might possibly have met me had I gone the other trail."

"And that man—who is he? There is no reason why it should be a secret with me? There are bad men at Touch-and-Go, whom any one might be pardoned for trying to avoid; but this man must be something more, I infer."

"You are right. While I am on his trail to strike and to slay, the time has not yet come for us to meet. When it does, I would ask nothing more than to stand face to face with Henry Harrington."

"Ah, with Henry Harrington! Boy, there are others who would ask the same boon, though it might mean death. Is he your foe?"

"Till death!"

"Hush! Hark!"

Madge suddenly sprung to their side, with one forefinger on her lip, while with the other she pointed.

They heard, at that, a trampling of feet outside, and almost immediately a heavy hand fell on the rude door.

CHAPTER II.

THE SACRED SEVEN.

In that knock there was something which sent a shiver through Clarence Clark, though he knew not why.

Though he had begun to talk, he was not by any means restored to his usual strength, and his nerves were still unstrung. Perhaps the movements of his companions, made on the instant of the knock, had something to do with it, for they were certainly mysterious.

Almost before the sound had ceased they had flitted to the other end of the cabin and disappeared!

There was a shuttered opening there, which served in warmer weather for a window, and of this they had taken advantage. Clarence Clark, as he called himself, was left alone to face the intruders, whoever they might be.

He had no time to consider what was the meaning of this hasty flight before the knock was repeated, and this time he answered feebly:

"Come in! You have as much right here as I myself."

Whether his bidding was heard or not, the door flew open, urged by no gentle hand, and a man strode into the cabin, peering around as he did so, with his revolver thrown up to a ready.

After him followed others, though Clark did not take time to count them. He saw at a glance they were rough-looking, and from their actions had grave doubts whether they were the kind he cared to meet.

The newcomers saw the young man lying in the glare of the fire.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Sharp and quick the question came, and the muzzle swept around so that the revolver covered the youth.

"I was caught in the storm, and came nigh to perishing. At almost the last gasp I was found by a man who brought me here. No doubt he saved my life. My name is Clarence Clark, and I was on my way from Walnut Bar to Touch-and-Go."

The men crowded closer. What was there in what I said to cause this?

"Found by a man? Who was he? What has become of him? Is this his shack?"

"Sorry I can't answer your questions," answered Clarence, now on his guard of suspicion and caution.

"He found me, as I said, brought me here, built this fire, and then went away. I never saw him before; probably will never see him again. All the same, he has my hearty thanks for having saved my life. If you see him tell him so. He has made a friend of me till death."

"How long ago was this?"

"I cannot tell. It may have been an hour; it may have been but a few minutes. Your knock seemed to rouse me from a trance. Make yourselves at home. A night like this all mankind ought to be welcome, anywhere."

"Out, some of you, and look for the trail!" exclaimed the leader, turning to the men.

"I thought I heard voices as we stood at the door, and it may be he has just left. If you find him you know what to do. I doubt if he could go far in this blizzard."

"Neither kin we, boss. Et gits wuss an' wuss. I'm thinkin' we'll hev' ter camp hyer fur ther night."

"Never mind what you think, Hyena! Take the lead, and find his trail. Time enough to think of the next move then."

He swung around so sharply as he spoke that the grumbler threw up both hands in evident dismay.

"My mistake, boss. We kin go whar you orders, ef et's ter Tophet. But I reckon ef we hit ther wrong man he's paid fur. Bones an' Flirter, come with me."

Drawing their weapons as they went, they passed out into the night.

Whether it was that the cabin had less protection from the wind, or the wind had actually raised in force, it seemed the storm had increased in violence.

The roar outside deepened, and flakes of snow came sifting in. When the door was opened a savage blast swirled in a great drift, and though the fire was burning brightly, it no longer seemed to be throwing out the gracious warmth which had revived the half-frozen youth. He shuddered as his eyes followed the three men.

It must be a desperate reason which would take them out on such a desperate night.

As for himself, Clarence Clark recognized the fact that he could do nothing.

He would have risked his life for his newly-made friends; but saw no need to throw it away. Besides that, he suspected his own life was none too safe, though it was a strange thing these men should care to add a causeless crime to their record.

His revolver, which Ralph had returned, was still convenient to his hand. For an instant he had a wild notion to spring up and fight his way out into the storm.

Wisdom prevailed.

There was a chance here that no harm would be done him; outside there was no chance at all. He lay quiet, and watched the leader from the corner of his eye.

The minutes passed in silence, until Hyena and his pards came trooping back.

"Sorry, boss, but ef my eyes was dubbel dimund mikerskopes I couldn't git a glimp' ov a trail. We bin round an' round ther shack, we jest sifted that snow down ter bedrock, an' we ain't found sign ov hair ner huff. Flirter are jest froze solid, an' Bones are next thing ter a stiff 'un. Ef so be you orders et we'll go out thar an' hand in our checks, but et won't do no good. We all both three thinks ef et war him he's passed on, an' when yer finds ther cabin we war speakin' ov we'll strike him."

"That will do. It is almost certain he did not see or hear us, and it is not likely he will come back again a night like this. As for this fool here, he knows too much. Tie him up till morning."

"Why not run him out right now? He'll have no tales to tell afore day, reek, an' et'll save rope er lead."

"Do as you are told. If need be, we can drop him over into the Devil's Gorge. If he dies it must be so that he vanishes without trace. See what he has on him, and make no more suggestions. The third time will be worse for you than for him."

The men advanced, and Clarence had heard every word of this. He saw there was no child's play coming, and threw his hand to his revolver, but as he attempted to spring to his feet he received a blow which knocked him senseless.

When he came to his senses again he was bound hand and foot, and was lying at the end of the room farthest from the fire.

He seemed to have been dumped there without the least regard to whether he might live or die, and, looking across the room, saw the chief examining the contents of his wallet, bending low before the roaring blaze to do so.

He was about completing his inspection and soon rose and turned to the men, who were silently lounging near.

"A little over seventy dollars. Share it among yourselves, and I will keep the papers. They are rather interesting reading to me, but would hardly be so to you."

"Villain!" muttered Clarence, between his teeth.

"I believe I recognize you at last!"

The words appeared to reach the ears of the chief. He stepped lightly across the room, and stood by the side of the lad, looking down into his eyes with a cruel smile.

"So you begin to suspect. Yes, I am the man you know of as Henry Harrington; and these men you see are the working members of the Sacred Seven. After hearing that you may know how much chance you have for your life!"

"You coward!" gritted the lad, between his teeth.

"You can well taunt me when my hands are tied, and I am a helpless prisoner. If you are a man, give me free limbs and face me here. I dare you to it."

"Ha, ha! For a young one, you try to crow loud. Why should I do anything of the kind? Excuse me, but I prefer to drop you down Devil's Gorge when morning comes—if you live that long. For reasons best known to myself you will leave no trail, and if there is any inquiry the mystery of where you went can never be solved."

"Make no mistake about that. If I vanish there are those who will know by whom was the taking off, and they will require full vengeance. They will know but too well where the bolt must fall."

"Mighty highflown talk for a youngster. To-morrow you will not be crowing so loudly. And as for the avengers—perhaps they will sleep as well as this poor lamb who has strayed hither for the slaughter. Sleep if you can. Rest well, for to-morrow you die."

Harrington turned back to his men, and for a little they talked together in a low tone. Clark heard some reference to "the hut." They spoke of the storm, which would blow itself out before daylight. By that time they hoped to be on the move. No doubt the surprise would be thorough.

It was not hard to understand that their presence here was not planned beforehand, and that they would not have stopped had it not been for the storm.

The murmur of voices seemed to sink lower, and be gradually dying away. The fire roared higher and the flames threw fantastic shadows. The cold no longer chilled Clarence to the bone. When the men lay down around the fire-place they seemed to him to be but moving shadows, and he scarcely was roused a little when Hyena dropped a blanket over him.

He must have dropped off into a doze altogether, though by and by he heard the voices of two whispering together, and they came to him as if in a dream.

"The boss seems kinder stuck on him, eh?"

"Kinder; but he mustn't git off."

"In course not. Ef I thort—"

"What?"

"Thet he warn't booked fur kingdom come I'd throttle him when ther rest are asleep, sure."

"Et could be did; an' it'd be a heap sight safer. Ef he gits ter Touch-and-Go, whar'll we be?"

"You tell. May ez well throttle him an' be sure. We'll do et."

Clarence heard, but hardly understood. There was silence after this, and again he slept, and an hour or so went by.

The fire no longer flared, and the end of the room lay dark. If Bones and his companion were standing guard they de-

served to be hung for careless watch. The smoldering coals told they had forgotten or neglected to put on fuel, and even at the chimney the air began to grow chill. It was an hour past midnight, and Clarence Clark suddenly awoke to feel a hand on his throat.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOWL OF THE WOLF.

At the touch Clarence was awake, and remembering everything.

The whispered plotting no longer seemed indefinite, and not to his interest to hear. He was the one who was to be throttled, and the executioners were here.

The hand touched him, but did not clutch. He was bound hand and foot, and so stiffened he felt as though he could not move even were he free. Fortunately his tongue refused to utter the defiance he was about to launch; he was not even able to call the captain, who possibly might object to his taking off at that time.

Then he heard the softest of whispers at his ear.

"On your life make no sound, and help me as you can. I am your friend, and will save you."

The speaker was bending over above him, and a chill draught came in through the opening where the shutter had been raised.

"I understand; be quick," was all that he said in answer.

Already he knew the awakening of the outlaws would be but the work of a minute or so, and he was almost sure he recognized the voice of the man he only knew as Ralph, and once before his preserver.

The hand at his neck caught him by the collar; another hand seized him by the thigh. Without any apparent effort he was lifted bodily from the floor and through the window, where another figure was dimly to be seen.

Madge was there, holding up the shutter, which she now let softly back.

A sharp knife slipped through the cords at wrists and hands, and without waiting for explanation Clarence Clark staggered off between the two.

In a moment they were out of the lee of the cabin, and then they felt the wind in all its biting force, while the snow, swirling up, beating down, driving against them, blinded, staggered and almost destroyed.

It did not seem they could go a dozen yards, though in reality the fury of the tempest was not as great as it had been an hour or so before.

Clarence did not care.

It was death to remain behind; he preferred death here, if it must come, though he did think once of going back and having a fight for his life before them all. He might have tried some such piece of insanity had he not been hurried away.

After all, his guides knew better than he, and were taking no great risks. The wind swept them along before it so that they turned neither to the right nor the left, and they found their way as if by magic. By the time Clark was thoroughly bewildered they had come to a halt before proceeding onward on a different path, and which might be perilous only for the missing of it.

They were at the edge of a great gorge. Right here it was possible to drop down to a path along its face, and be sheltered altogether from the storm.

Madge dropped to the ledge without hesitation, and stood expectant.

"Take him," said Ralph, as he gathered the youth up and swung him over.

Madge's strong arms were upraised. She caught him, lowered him steadily and safely to his feet, and then Ralph slipped down beside them.

A step or two, and they were altogether out of reach of the blizzard. Then, with the girl in front and Ralph in the rear, his hand on Clarence Clark's shoulder, the three wound their way along. The path was doubtless unknown to the Sacred Seven, and there was little danger they would discover it now. Not, at least, before morning.

The bewilderment of Clarence continued. He moved on mechanically without a thought of whither he was being led. The path was reasonably a safe one, and Ralph's hand was on his shoulder. A slip or a stumble could hardly bring him harm, though the black chasm to his left only ended hundreds of feet below, when the bed of the canyon was reached. Practically he knew nothing of that second journey until he had come to its end. They came up out of the gorge, and entering a door, found themselves in another cabin, much more comfortable than the first, in which a low fire was burning.

"Here we are, safe and sound," laughed Madge, as she glided across the threshold.

"We have saved the young lamb, and now, perhaps, he may save us. He is new to this sort of work, and his breaking in has been of the roughest."

Again Clarence Clark had to go through the trials of a return to full identity, but this time it did not take so long.

The exercise had done him good, and his chief trouble was bewilderment caused by the storm. Even that had been passing away, for of late he had been gathering strength with every step. He nodded an answer to the words of Ralph, and stretched his limbs as though taking the kinks out of them.

Meantime, he was thinking. He remembered something of what he had heard, and it appeared to belong to this adventure. When he could put it together once more it would be well to tell it to Ralph and Madge.

"Feel better, do you?" continued the former.

"For a youngster new to such things you have had rather a rough breaking in. If I am not mistaken, no one ever came nearer twice to death than you did to-night, and yet marched away with flying colors."

"I believe you, and for my escape I can thank you. I would sooner do it with actions than words, though I think I can give you a warning which may not be amiss. When I lay a prisoner on the spot where you found me, I was not altogether dreaming, though at the time perhaps I half believed I was. I think I understand better now some of the things I heard."

"Did you hear how they came to turn up there, just when least expected? I tell you, the jumps Madge and I made were more energetic than graceful, and we had not a moment to spare. If they had ever seen us it would have been good-by for you."

"From what I heard I believe the storm drove them in, and they were more surprised to find me there than you were at their coming."

"But what brought them abroad such a night? There is no one wiser in weather signs than Hank Harrington."

"I should judge they expected a storm, but not such a one as is raging. They were on the way for some other cabin, which should be this. The blizzard caused them to halt, but they seem to

expect the storm to blow itself out by morning, when they will move on again. If the wind lulls you may expect them here."

"You are sure of this?"

Ralph appeared to be startled by the intelligence, and as he spoke he glanced over at Madge with a troubled look.

Clarence Clark's eyes followed in the same direction, and for the first time he fairly saw the countenance of the girl whom he only knew as Madge.

It was a fresh face, a lovely face, glowing with youth and beauty. The wrappings which had concealed face and figure had been thrown off, and as her glance met his Clarence thought she was one to die for. She leaned forward to hear his answer, and he saw she, too, was deeply interested in what was to come.

"Of course, I cannot say that it is this very place they were seeking, but there was some other cabin than that at which they found me, the location of which they knew, and which they had intended to attack if they had not been turned aside by the storm. You can judge better than I, but I think this is the one they meant."

"It is all the difference in the world whether they actually know its location, or whether they just guess at its existence. What were the exact words you heard?"

Clarence recalled them as well as he could, and as he repeated them they seemed more than ever to indicate an exact knowledge.

So Ralph seemed to think.

"It must be so. One of their scouts has some way stumbled upon the secret of the place. It was well for us, perhaps, that we came across you this night. They might have taken us unawares, for in a storm like this our sentinel is within doors, and we might not have thought to place him again before it was too late."

"Your sentinel?"

"Yes. You have not seen him, but I will venture to say he has taken very close note of you, and that he could pick you out of a thousand. Here, Bobo, come here!"

From the darkest corner of the room something came shambling out at the order. The firelight was flung back from two glowing eyes, a cavernous mouth opened with a long yawn which ended in a sigh, and something like a snarl, and a white wolf, of immense size, stalked fearlessly up to rub his side against Ralph and give a canine wag of his bushy tail.

Then he turned his attention to Clarence, the huge beast crouched low as though about to spring.

If the threatening movement was for a test of the youth's courage it was a successful one. Clarence never winced, but quietly laid his hand on the great head, which was fairly within reach.

He knew well enough of the snap of the wolf, which is given like lightning, and scores deep, but in the presence of Ralph and Madge he was not afraid.

The animal turned the touch into a caress, and fawned upon him as though on an old friend.

"That is enough. Bobo and you are friends. You could come boldly up to the cabin without his appearing to notice. There are others who cannot, however, and he will have to go out into the storm to watch for them. The wind lulls every minute, and if they discover your absence they may waste no further time."

"Still, I doubt if they will come before morning."

"We will be ready for them then, and meantime Bobo will let us know if they turn up sooner. We will make a move that will checkmate them. Take what rest you can. In two hours, if the wind keeps going down, you will have to risk the mountains once more—unless you care to wait for Harrington."

"Never! I will take the blizzard first!"

Little more was said. Bobo was turned out on guard, and appeared to go quite willingly, for he knew his business. Then Clark threw himself down on the couch provided for him, and, strange as it may seem, was soon asleep.

It seemed to him he had but hardly closed his eyes when he was awakened.

"Come! It is daybreak. If they intend to try the assault they will soon be here. Bobo has scented them and given warning."

"And the storm?"

"Is over; but the snow lies deep in places. We will take you to another place of refuge. When we can we will guide you toward Touch-and-Go, though you will scarcely reach it to-day."

The door was open, and from what seemed a great distance the warning howl of Bobo floated up and in.

CHAPTER IV.

DROPPED IN THE GULF.

It seemed hardly possible the storm had so soon passed away.

The morning was clear, but bitterly cold, and the sun, when it shone through the pines, sparkled on rifts and drifts of snow. It seemed almost impossible that the four should be able to seek another place of refuge without leaving a trail behind them.

But Ralph was not only intimately acquainted with the ground, but he was wise in the ways of the storm.

Though there were places where the mantle of snow lay level and smooth, and others where it was heaped up in great ridges, there were still others where the wind had swept the rocks smooth, or a break before the blizzard had left the windward side bare.

On leaving the cabin they at first left a bold trail, which seemed to laugh at the idea of concealment.

But before long, with Ralph in the lead, they wound to the right, and returned without so much as leaving a footprint.

Then they once more left the place by the route over which Clarence Clark had been guided the preceding night. This move might not altogether throw the expected enemy off the scent; yet, with the track leading away, there was a strong possibility some time would be spent searching for the trail beyond the point where it was lost.

They went along the narrow path for perhaps a quarter of a mile.

Then Ralph called a halt.

"For various reasons I did not care to make a stand at the hut, though we might have beaten them off. Madge, who knows the way, will go on to guard a further point. You will remain here, while I will go back and see what is being done and call Bobo off. Most likely he would take care of himself; but he may get enthusiastic, and the Sacred Seven are close shooters. I do not care to lose him."

"Would it not be better for me to go with you?"

"No. This is one place where the hidden trail can be reached from above, and with your revolvers you can make a successful fight if they should make the attempt to flank us. Keep close watch on yonder point until I return.

Do not let one of the Sacred Seven pass it."

He spoke in a tone of authority, and without waiting for discussion turned and took the back track.

Madge moved just as promptly, so that Clarence was left alone on the ledge to wait and watch.

He drew his revolver and examined the cylinder to see that it was in perfect working order. Then he crouched down along the rocky wall, and with eyes fixed on the danger spot resigned himself to his lonely vigil.

The moments went along, and in the gorge the silence was utter. He looked upward for the most part, all the time doubting if any one would dare to attempt the descent, but now and then cast a glance downward. So far as he could see there was a gulf without bottom.

Still, there was no sound from above, and he heard nothing of Ralph or the wolf. He was growing nervously anxious, when there was something like a shout and the report of a pistol sounding from beyond the rocks behind which Madge had disappeared.

Clarence sprang to his feet. The girl was in danger, and he cared no more for his instructions to watch the point above. Pistol in hand he dashed away.

He knew he had not far to go, and if there were any dangers in the way he forgot them as he bounded along, though at no time could he see half a dozen yards ahead of him on the trail.

But, fortunately, he had not far to go; and as at last he turned an angle which shut off his view he came to a little plateau where the scene was being enacted.

Madge stood at bay, her back against the rock, her hand extending a revolver. The man he had recognized as Harrington was slowly approaching, his eyes fixed firmly on hers, while some little distance in Harrington's rear, crouching on the ground, with a levelled pistol in the one hand, while with the other he nursed a wounded leg, was Flirter.

Clark threw up his pistol hand, but dropped it without pulling trigger. Harrington stood right in line with the girl, and there was a chance that a bullet would go through and through them both.

He swung the weapon away to its scabbard and sprung fearlessly forward.

He was little more than a boy in weight and age, but at that moment would have willingly flung himself upon the leader of the Sacred Seven, and felt he could tear him from the ground.

With the benefit of the surprise he might have given Harrington a hard fight had they been alone together, but unfortunately there was another party to be considered.

Clarence had no eyes for anything but Madge and her danger, and as he darted forward received a heavy blow back of the ear, which staggered him to the ground, whilst over him stooped a Hyena, with a grin on his hardened face.

"Reckon this time we got yer beyond gettin' away. We gethered up yer chips last night, so thar ain't no use ter delay 'bout cashin' in. Good bye, John."

His hand closed on the white throat, tightening fiercely. He meant to have no mistake about it, and while the vise-like grip ever tightened he looked up to see how Harrington was progressing.

The captain had been deliberately advancing, and through the magnetism of the eye was not allowing a thought of Madge to escape him. He knew what

was coming the instant before she pulled the trigger, and dodged to one side.

The bullet went humming viciously past, on a line with his heart, and before the hammer could rise again he had her in his arms.

"One of the accursed pair at last. Through her we can take the other. A dainty bait you are, my lady, and we will see to it that the trap we set is worthy of you."

His arms held her, and his hands closed about her wrists. She was utterly helpless, and knew the danger she was in, but did not cry out, nor even struggle after the first convincing effort. But she looked along to where Hyena was kneeling upon the prostrate youth, slow murder in his grip.

"Call off your hound, there!" she exclaimed. "What need to kill the boy since the fight is over?"

"Let the hound worry the whelp," answered Harrington, carelessly glancing in the direction of the two.

"He has been sulking for a day or two, and needs a little blood to take the edge off of his temper. And a boy or less is of little account when the bigger game is afoot."

"Beware!" retorted Madge.

"Of what?" laughed the chief; and at that moment something like a thunderbolt struck him.

He went down in a heap, his hold on Madge relaxing, whilst with forepaws on his breast, and teeth all shown in a savage snarl, Bobo stood over him, his mouth open and ready to close on the neck which lay near to his jaws.

"Watch him, Bobo!" sharply ordered the girl, picking up the weapon which dropped from her grasp.

She was still slow to kill, but meant to save Clarence at all hazards. There were yet three bullets in her revolver, and she did not doubt she could place them where they were wanted.

Her words had reached the ears of the Hyena, who had listened with the wicked grin still around his lips. Unfortunately he was looking downward once more just when Bobo came bounding on the carpet, so that he did not see the fall of the chief.

The struggle which Clarence had suddenly begun was much stronger than any he had expected, and for a moment he found himself very busy. The throat writhed from under his grasp, and Clark was almost upon his feet when he heard the sharp cry of "Watch him, Bobo!"

In spite of himself he looked in that direction, and saw Harrington's danger. He struck fiercely at Clark's head, which dropped away before the blow, and then bounded to the rescue. He intended to strike Madge first, and after that, Bobo.

Clarence was half dazed and weak from his struggle, but by some wonderful chance he had dodged the blow aimed at his head, and was up on his feet, and staggering after the Hyena before that worthy was fairly started.

Madge took a snap shot at the outlaw as he came, and when he staggered back Clark struck him a savage blow on the corner of the jaw. Between wound and stroke the man collapsed; and Madge caught the boy by the hand.

"This way, quick! We must fly now, before it is too late. The rest of them are coming."

"But Ralph?" mumbled Clarence.

"He can take care of himself. Only that he does not yet care to slaughter he would have exterminated the gang. If they drive him too hard he will think their time in truth has come."

So she answered as she hurried him along, holding him tightly by the hand.

Nor was the retreat an instant too soon. As Bobo leaped to her side at a snap of her fingers, a yell arose behind them. The rest of the gang had suddenly come in sight, having doubtless reached the ledge by the point which Clarence had been left to guard, and they charged forward with a hurrah.

Madge was fleet of foot as a mountain sheep, and without the cumberance of her friend would soon have left them far behind; but Clarence was yet weak and giddy, and she was dragging him along in a way which might soon exhaust her powers. The Seven were gaining on her.

Flirter was still out of the game, but Harrington had staggered to his feet comparatively unhurt, while the Hyena was staggering on with the rest, and savage for vengeance.

It was possible for Madge to launch the wolf at them, but she was loth to do that until the last moment had come. Ralph might make his appearance; and when Clark regained fully his wits they could turn and fight. Not very far away there was an elegant place for a stand. If she only had the use of both hands she would be loading her revolver as she ran, but she dared not let go of her companion.

Looking back over her shoulder she could see how much the pursuit had gained, and hardly thinking what she did, threw up her hand and fired.

Whether the bullet reached a mark or not, the answer was a more savage burst of yells; and then came a single pistol shot, which missed Clarence and Madge, but just grazed Bobo, who trotted on the inner side.

The ball did not bite deeply, but it stung, and the huge wolf, startled at the wound, gave a quick lurch to the side, which knocked the feet from under Clarence King. He lurched heavily in turn, stumbled, slipped, and went sliding over the edge of the precipice.

For a moment he hung there, his wrist just showing above the rock, while Madge braced herself vainly, yet never opened her hand. Then she, too, toppled and went over the brink. Bobo looked, uttered a howl, and followed.

CHAPTER V. MYRTLE.

At the disappearance the men halted in something like real terror. Hardened though they were they could not see two human beings dropping to what seemed instant death without a thrill of pity.

"By ther great grizzly, we got 'em both!" exclaimed Bones, who seemed the least startled of them all.

"This time thar ain't no doubtin' on it. Ther kid hez passed in his checks, sure; an' ther gal, she's gone along with him."

"What in Hades have you been doing?" sharply interrupted the captain, brushing his hand across his eyes, and peering forward toward the spot where the two had disappeared.

"Who fired that shot?"

"Twan't ther shot ez did et, boss. It war ther blamed wolf. I tried ter plug him, an' he give a war dance thet canted 'em over ther rocks. Then he follered. I reckon he hed a bullet through his brain; but sich cattle dies hard, an' ef one ov us hed bin thar he'd a made strings ov him jest too quick."

Harrington did not stop to listen, but staggered on to the verge of the cliff, at the spot where the fugitives went over.

Looking down on the rock he saw a drop or two of blood that told him this was the place, and throwing himself

down, he craned his neck over the edge of the precipice.

Away down below, so far that it made him giddy to look at it, he saw the bottom of the canyon, but no trace or sign was there of the unfortunates, though he gazed long and keenly.

"The cursed rock hangs over so you can't see the bottom of the wall, but it's strange they should not have fallen in sight. They must be buried in a drift."

"Saves a funeral, cap. Thar ain't no bein' ez could take that tum'le an' keep alive."

"Likely—and yet not sure. We should know. Is there any one here who knows of a way down?"

At the question all shook their heads.

"Not within half a dozen mile, an' without ropes. With sich goin' ez this I ain't the one ter want ter take ther tramp."

"Not ter say nothin' ov ther fact thet we ain't struck ther hub ov ther concern ez yit. It wan't ther gal we war arter, ner yit ther kid, but thar's a man loose ez we wants ter drap er he'll drap us, sure. Et'll be time ernuf ter poke 'round down thar when we git his toes turned up."

"Right you are. We must run no risks of losing him. No doubt he has remained behind to cover the retreat of the others. We may as well investigate. Perhaps we can find a spot from which we can obtain a sidelong view of the ground below better than the one here. Come."

The party turned away from the spot, where none of them seemed to have a desire to linger. They plodded along the ledge, and watched closely as they went, but nowhere did they see anything of the man called Ralph. If he was near he kept himself hidden, and their way to the empty cabin was open.

They reached the spot at last, and a hasty search revealed that the building was empty, and that it contained little of any value.

"Put the torch to it," ordered the captain; and without hesitation he was obeyed.

The flames quickly rolled up, and a lurking place of the man they feared and hated was in the way of destruction.

They did not give over the search at once, but try as they might, they found no further traces, and could catch no glimpse of any living thing in the bottom of the canyon.

"Baffled once more," growled Harrington, in no good humor, as they left the spot.

"But we took in part ov ther gang," suggested Bones, who tramped by his side, and was none the worse for wear.

"Better for us, perhaps, if we had falled altogether. So far the man has been content with threats, and as Touch-and-Go was none the safest of places for him to venture into, we might have taken the risks and let him run. Now he will begin to think it is time to act. And there is that boy. For reasons of my own I did not care to have him die."

"An' yit, after seein' us on ther war-path, an' knowin' what he did 'bout us, it wouldn't hev done ter let him git inter camp."

"I am sure I would not have run the risk. He would be a stranger there, and his word would have been of no account against mine. It would have been time enough to think of taking him off when he showed his hand, and we could judge whether he was likely to crowd us close."

"Mebbe he ain't dead yit; an' ef yer says so we'll hunt fur him. Sich trash dies hard, an' ef we found him livin' we might bring him inter camp rejoicin'."

"Don't be a fool. He has gone over the divide for sure, and if I saw him halting on the way, I would have to send him along, after all that he has seen and heard."

"But be we goin' ter give et up so?"

"We must. As well look for a needle in a haystack as for Red Ralph on these mountains at a time like this. Perhaps he may find us. If he don't, we will go back to Touch-and-Go. And I need hardly tell you all we must keep quiet about this little adventure. It is one thing to hunt an outlaw; it is another to slaughter a woman and a boy. It would hardly go down, even at Touch-and-Go, if someone took a notion to call us to account."

"Say, boss, who war ther boy, anyhow? 'Pears like we got a centerest in him, an' we orter know."

"Never mind that. It will be time enough to tell when we know whether he is downed for good, or escaped by a miracle. Enough that he knows, or knew, something of the Sacred Seven, and that if he had lived he would have been their keenest foe. He came here to hunt us down, and probably it was your life or his."

"An' he must a hed it in fur you, 'long with ther rest ov us. I don't jest see why you war so bent on a spairin' ov him. Mebbe we'd understand better ef we knowed his name."

"There is no mystery about that. He told it to you, did he not? Clarence Clark it is. Drop it now. It's a long ways yet to Touch-and-Go, and we ought to be there before the night closes."

"Drap she am; but I'd like ter know ef that war his really right handle. Don't 'pear ter me ez I ever heard et afore."

"You never did, but he is a boy with a mission. Wait. Some day I may tell you more. Just now I do not care to say more about the matter."

This time Harrington's tone was final.

Even Bones did not care to trouble him farther, and the little party went on in silence, keeping a keen lookout for the appearance of Red Ralph, which they more than half expected.

He did not turn up, however, and as it happened, they re-entered Touch-and-Go without meeting a living soul in the course of the journey.

Once there, they separated, and Harrington strode on by himself.

The storm had struck the town with no mean force, though it had not raged there with the severity it had done on the mountains. The streets showed here and there a drift, and few persons were abroad, even now.

Harrington never looked to the right nor to the left until he reached the "Living Light" Saloon, which was the most pretentious gambling den in the place, and one in which he was a partner.

It was quite a building, formed by bringing two of the largest houses in the town under one roof, and he did not enter the saloon proper, but went in by a rear door, which took him directly into a living apartment.

A woman arose at his entrance and gave a little cry of delight upon recognizing who it was.

"Back again, Myrtle, and safe, as usual."

He gave her a careless caress as he spoke, and then threw himself down in a chair with a sigh of satisfaction. He was well tired with his late tramp, and was not ashamed to show it before her eyes.

There was no question about the delight of the woman at seeing him once more; yet there were times when this marble-faced woman could be as impassive as a statue. Touch-and-Go was

apt to speak of her as a beautiful woman, indeed, but one without a heart.

The trouble with her was that she had no heart for any of them save one, and that one was the man who now was with her.

"You are tired—you must be hungry," she said in an anxious fashion.

"Not a bit of it. I passed right by the door and thought of going in for a bite, but decided I had not a grain of appetite. Perhaps appetite may come by and by; but just now I feel more like resting up, so that I can be on hand for to-night. Anything new last night?"

"Yes. Something new, and decidedly odd. There was a stranger against the bank, and he won every time. Nothing but a boy, at that."

Harrington gave a start.

"A boy! What was he like? It could not have been—of course not."

The latter part was said to himself.

"Of course not—what? You speak as though you might guess who it was. He was a stranger to me, and somehow wormed his way into the game without being noticed. With his luck he might have broken the bank if he had gone for it in earnest."

"What was he playing for if it was not for coin? He could not have been the boy I was thinking of, for I found him far enough away from here by midnight."

"Ah, there would have been time. He dropped out at an early hour, and I saw no more of him. Some said he was scared away by a bluff of Reddy Pete, but I doubt it. He looked like a lad that had nerve for a dozen. I do not believe he would have quailed even with the drop on him."

"You must have noticed him more than a little."

"I did, for somehow I thought he was studying me. And I thought perhaps he had something to do with your expedition of last night. The less I know about your outside work the better, yet—were you successful?"

"No. It was worse than a failure, though in one way it may have been of use. It will bring things to a crisis, or I am much mistaken. Ralph Royston and I cannot live longer on the same side of the divide."

"That is enough. When the moment of danger comes you will find me at your side. Till then I ask to know nothing more than you think best to tell me. We have trusted each other thus far, and I think we can keep on doing so to the end."

"The end—yes," said Harrington, gloomily, at the same time gathering himself up.

"I am not sure I care for myself how soon that may come; but it makes me wretched to think what I have done toward bringing it for you."

"Never think of that. We have been close together all these years, and when you go I am with you. Surely, you believe?"

She was well past the first flush of youth, but she could be fascinating yet. When his eyes met hers he saw there was a suspicion of tears in her swimming eyes.

"So be it, Myrtle," he answered, an unwonted softness in his tone. Hard and cruel though he might be to the rest of the world, there was somewhere down in his heart a warm spot that this woman had reached.

"I hope the end is long enough off. Forget what I have been saying. As for the boy—I doubt if we see him again. There was one of the brood disappeared up in the mountains, and luck seems to

be running our way, though snags do show now and then. I will look for you at the Light on time, as usual. I must go in and see what there is to report."

He dropped a light kiss on her lips, and slipped out of the room. As she had said, it would be as well for her to know nothing of what happened the night before upon the mountain.

Things were running on after their usual fashion at the saloon, and there was nothing particular to note. Of the men who had come back to town with him, two or three had dropped in, but they made no sign, taking their places among the crowd after their customary fashion. At 9 o'clock Myrtle glided in and took her place at the table in the inner room. As usual, her face was masked.

A few moments later the door of the saloon opened and two young men—one of them seemingly very young—entered.

Harrington looked up on the instant, stared sharply, and though he gave no other outward show, a singular look came into his eyes. In spite of the long, yellow locks which hung over the shoulders of the taller, and the rest of what was a careful disguise, he believed he recognized Clarence Clark.

Who the other might be he made a strange guess, though he had thought them both buried deep in the snow-drifts at the foot of the wall of the Devil's Canyon.

With the dead alive and before him, it was no wonder that, as he thought, for a moment the color of his cheeks slightly paled.

CHAPTER VI.

A BIG RUN OF LUCK.

It was only a momentary show of excitement on the part of Harrington, and the color returned to his face so quickly that it is doubtful if anyone had time to notice its absence.

He gave a swift glance in the direction of Myrtle, and understood a slight motion which she made.

The smaller of the lads was the one who had gone against the bank the previous evening, while the other was, to her, a total stranger.

As for the lads, they took in the entire room at a single, sweeping glance, and without a doubt recognized Harrington, though they gave no show of having any particular interest in him.

They made their way to the faro table without hesitation, and the lesser lad threw down a couple of chips on the queen. It seems he had reserved some out of his winnings when he cashed in the previous evening.

The checks were played flat-footed, and Myrtle saw at a glance that they would be lost, for she knew the run of all the cards in the box.

No one had ever charged seriously that a skin game was being run at the Living Light, but, all the same, the lady dealer was a thorough mistress of her profession, and whether she ever sprung the cards or not, she was able by a single deft twist of the wrist to so divide them in the shuffle that the one-half would win all the way through while the other half lost.

The thought came to her at once that the luck of the youngster was broken; and that after a deal or two he would drop out of the game.

She hoped so, at least.

It had been a great mistake allowing him to begin, but now the oversight had been committed it was a little doubtful if he could be barred out without more trouble than she cared to risk.

A weakness for youngsters was the one weak point about Myrtle. She had a way about her which, for the most part, kept the older hands in order. No matter how rough the gamester who ran against the game, she never shrank from the deal, or doubted that she could hold her own.

Sure enough, the queen lost, and with a light laugh the young sport strung his chips on the corner of the queen for the queen and three to win. Both of them were supposed to be case cards.

Several turns went along and then suddenly the youngster exclaimed: "Bar this turn!"

Myrtle glanced over at him and nodded.

It was no unusual thing for a player to take a notion of the kind, and as he spoke before the next card had moved the right was allowed.

It attracted attention, however, and as the top card slipped off the queen showed as the first of the turn.

"That kims ov a fresh youngster puttin' in his oar whar men plays," growled a harsh voice from the other end of the table.

"He'll squeal like a whitehead when ther bank rakes in ther stake what he's left in hock. Reckon he never thought of ther rules ov ther house."

The speaker was Reddy Pete, the same man who had some slight difficulty with the lad the night before, when he left off winner without treating the house.

There was something in what he said, for the rule of the Living Light was the old-fashioned one that all bets flat on the hock card—or the last in the box—as well as money on the table which neither won nor lost at the end of the deal, belonged to the house.

"Don't worry over my kicking, little man," murmured the young player in a soft but steady voice.

"It is time enough to do that when I lose. Dealer, it goes!"

Again the lady with the box nodded, but had it not been for the mask which concealed her features a close observer would have seen something like a troubled look in her eyes.

What the cue box said was one thing; her own recollections were another. It hazily struck her there might have been a mistake somewhere. Would any trouble come out of it? It could not be long before it was decided one way or the other.

She was right.

In the very next turn, when the card for the bank was drawn out, another queen was revealed. The cue box had been wrong.

"Reckon I won't kick as long as the little beauty wins," laughed the young sport. "All the same I'd advise the house to get a cue-keeper that can tell a jack from a queen. It might make some people think you were getting ready to spring the cards, and hadn't the nerve to make the raffle."

"Touch-and-Go knows better, young man, and outsiders don't count," said a quiet voice almost at his elbow. "If you don't like the deal jump it and cash in. There are plenty more to take your place, who would stand to win a heap sight more than we can rake out of your little ten-cent game."

Harrington was as soft and silken as ever when dangerous at his table, but those who knew him best understood the insinuation had cut him deeply, and more than one wondered he had not thrown the impudent youngster out of the house.

"You think?" drawled the lad, appar-

ently recognizing the interest of the speaker in the bank.

"Maybe you'd like to raise the limit off of your little tinhorn game and have a rustle for blood and hair. And if you'd only pull the cards yourself—one don't feel like rustling the bank when a lady has the box."

It was a straight defiance, which the bank could hardly afford to overlook, when it came from a winner, young though he looked.

"I suspect the flyer will suit you very well as it is, even if it don't oversize your pile. The bank is always ready to pull the cards for all the chips you can pile on the table, and when it runs out of checks it will pay in hard, cold cash. But if that don't suit, you bet your wallet on the turn, and if you win we'll pay you four to one—if it's ten thousand on a cat-hop."

As he spoke Harrington moved around the table and took the dealing box from the hands of Myrtle. The last offer was a liberal one, for when there are two of a kind in the last three cards the odds are only two to one, and a winner receives pay accordingly.

"All right. A running limit that ends with the roof of the house is what suits me. It's a little slower, but it's just as sure. I'll heap it up on the trey while we're waiting for the last turn."

With a reckless cast he dropped his stack of chips on the three spot, folded his arms, and watched the gambler with a smile, well assured that from now on to its end the deal would be fair, since Harrington had nothing to do with placing the cards in the box.

The amount was larger than Harrington had expected, and came near to reaching the limit. He saw that he was fairly committed to the game, and after one more glance over the table, slowly pushed off the top card in the box, and uncovered a nine spot. Under that lay the lone trey.

A hum arose around the table, for the spectators had listened to the chaff with interest, which grew as they watched the play.

Evidently the young sport was in luck, and more than one wished he had taken advantage of the streak and followed his lead on the trey. The question now was, how it would be if he risked his all on the last turn in the box, which was not far away.

Almost breathlessly they watched his face for a little, and then a dozen necks were craned over to get a glimpse at the cue box, though the most of them knew well enough what was left.

Two kings and a deuce remained, and without hesitation the young sport strung his chips to play them in that order. Then he hesitated a moment.

A mocking smile curled the lips of the dealer.

"It's one thing to play on velvet, and another to put up hard, cold coin of your own. That's a fair-sized pile, but nothing to brag on. It hardly scratches the limit."

"Have you scales?"

The question smacked of the old times, when dust was the only money known in the camps, and a balance was the most important of the paraphernalia of a gaming table. Harrington nodded, and said a few words to the looker-out at his right, who left his seat on the raised chair.

He was gone for but a moment. When he returned he brought with him the article called for.

It was the turn of the young sport to smile.

He drew out from a stout leather

pocket attached to his belt a buckskin bag, and flung it on the table.

"You must think I want to weigh mosquito wings to bring on an affair like that. There's ten pounds of oro in the sack; weigh it by the spoonful if you want to, but any way, it sizes the weight of the bank, which they told me stopped at ten thousand."

Harrington never winced, but coldly opened the bag to turn out a handful of the contents. He watched the arm of the scales drop on the side of the dust, and then carefully returned the shining scales.

"It goes," he said, tersely, and, after a momentary pause, uncovered the first card of the turn.

It was the king of clubs.

CHAPTER VII.

BLOOD ON THE SNOW.

The hum ceased. The interest of the crowd was too deep to allow of utterance; and when the king of clubs slipped off, to show the king of hearts beneath him, the silence changed into a roar. When the bank loses a stake such as the one just played for, the winner, for the moment at least, is the great man of the house.

"Game is closed for to-night," said Harrington, without a quiver in his voice.

"Take his chips, Pete, and pay him ten thousand. That's the size of the bank to-night, and he has taken its full measure."

He threw down the box as he spoke, and, rising from his chair, strode away.

Back in the crowd lurked one of the men who had been with the gambler on the raid of the previous night, and he caught a glance which he understood. He did not at once move, but a few minutes after Harrington had disappeared strolled out of the room.

The young sport glanced around carelessly.

Wonderful as had been his winnings in the short time he had been bucking the tiger, he did not appear unduly elated; or, in fact, excited over it at all.

Touch-and-Go was a rough and tough place and this was a rough and tough crowd which surrounded him, but that gave him no apparent uneasiness.

One thing, however, could be noticed. During his previous visit, and when he entered the room this evening, there had not been a sign of a weapon visible about him.

Now, from some place where they had been concealed, he had drawn around a brace of revolvers so that their handles lay in plain sight and easy reach.

It looked as though he realized his danger and intended to protect himself.

"Gents, all," he exclaimed, with a touch to his hat, followed by a graceful gesture toward the other room; "I'm not given to such things myself, but I know what is your vanity and expectation. They shan't be disappointed."

There had been some enthusiasm before, but this raised it to a white heat. It required some agility, and a good deal of firm determination, to avoid being carried out to the other room on the shoulders of the cheering mob. On a night like this all Touch-and-Go would be indoors, and a goodly portion of its population was indoors at the Living Light.

"No, thanks," he continued, laughing genially.

"As far as a hundred dollars goes the town will have my best regards, and I know it will pardon me if I don't join in the general jamboree. I like to see

men enjoy themselves, but this is not my style. I'll wait for such play till my beard is full grown."

He threw down the hundred dollars, which was to turn the bar wide open while it lasted, and then slipped out of the crowd, which was eagerly pushing forward.

"This way," he whispered, catching Clarence Clark by the arm.

Out into the night they made their way, and near the corner of the building halted for a moment.

"I must go back now, and if you are bent on staying here I shall have to leave you. I doubt if we would be safe together, and I don't know which is in the most danger if we separate. Here. Take care of this, and use what you need. They'll make a try for my wealth if they get on the trail, and perhaps something can be saved from the wreck if things should go against me. Good night."

He held out his hand, which Clark grasped firmly, and before Clarence could voice his objection had thrust into his pocket a large share of his winnings as he had received them from the bank.

Without waiting to hear more he then turned and darted away.

Clarence Clark would have called after him, but there might be other ears ready to hear, and Clark did not trust the people of Touch-and-Go. It was policy for his late companion to get out of town as quietly as could be. The wealth he was known to have on him was temptation enough to bring him danger.

"I would follow," he thought to himself, as he watched the retreating figure, "were I not afraid it might bring him more danger. If they have failed to see him depart they might track me, for something tells me that there is danger afoot for—"

He broke off in the thread of his thoughts, and stared eagerly at a brace of moving shadows that suddenly came into his range of vision.

They were following on the trail of the youngster, and Clark scented danger. Without more than that first hesitation, he darted forward, silent and eager.

He had already lost sight of his late companion, and in a moment or two more the following figures also disappeared, being hidden by the intervening buildings of the crooked street, but he did not hesitate on that account.

He uttered no sound, for the street seemed otherwise deserted, and he had his doubts about the utility of summoning assistance. The fewer men of Touch-and-Go who appeared on the scene the safer it was likely to be for the lads, who had to take care of all the wealth which had been seen at the Living Light.

Quickly he passed the buildings which had cut off his view, and found then that the two had lost no time, if, indeed, they had not already got in their work. They were bending over something which lay motionless between them.

At sight of that he broke into a run, and, drawing his revolver, was about to throw it up to an aim when something struck him on the breast and he fell backward.

He did not lose consciousness, and it seemed to him that he was on his feet again in an instant; but when he looked for them, the figures had disappeared.

He was chilled with a great fear, but did not hesitate. There was a little dark mound still to be seen in the gloom, and he guessed only too well what it was.

He threw himself down by the motionless figure of the young sport and put his hand out to feel his heart.

There was a throbbing there yet; but he felt something else—something warm and wet. The blood was trickling out from a wound, and it stained Clarence Clark's hand a deep crimson, even before he recognized what had happened.

"Are you dead? Are you dying?" he asked, abroad for the moment, though he did not hesitate to pick up the body and stagger back toward the Living Light, and the heart of the town.

He would have shouted, but he had no breath to waste, nor was he sure it would be the part of wisdom. Half the distance had he traversed when he thought he heard a gasping sigh from the mouth at his shoulder.

It was not altogether curiosity which made him ease the body down. His late exertions and the blow he had received were beginning to tell on him, and it was time he took a moment's breathing spell.

His heart was throbbing, his head beating, and he was in no fit condition to tell whether the body he had been carrying was that of one dead or alive.

Then there was a yell, two or three dark figures pounced upon him, and some one began to shoot off his revolver as fast as he could work it.

The shots, fired in that way, were a signal which Touch-and-Go understood, and seldom failed to answer to.

Out from sheds and shanties, out from saloons and stores, came the citizens, and with a little army from the Living Light in the advance, rushed toward the spot. Before Clarence Clark could realize what was happening he was surrounded by a mob—all too ready to be set on fire at the first stroke of the match—which began work by knocking him down.

"Murder she be," exclaimed one of the men who had first come upon the scene.

"We cotched him in the ack. Dunno who ther gerloot be, but he put a knife in ther tother one. Then they hed it, nip an' tuck, tell jest ez we kim up he downed him fur good."

"Who is it? What's it all about?"

A dozen voices took up the cry, which Clarence was too dazed to answer.

"No use ter ax," growled Reddy Pete, thrusting a lantern forward.

"It's ther chap ez broke ther bank at ther Livin' Light, an' this are ther cuss ez war freezin' on ter him when they went out. He's downed him fur his wealth."

Clark was up and glaring around him, his hand feeling for the revolver he had not yet drawn. He heard the accusation, but had no answer ready, and if he had thought of making a movement it was now too late. A dozen revolvers covered him; almost as many hands clutched him, and Pete, looking up from the body on the snow, shouted:

"He's cleaned ther poor cuss out slick ez a loon on a mill pond! See ef he's got ther boodle on him."

CHAPTER VIII.

HELD FOR JUDGE LYNCH.

Clark was stunned by the magnitude of the charge.

Had he been guilty he might have found voice to utter a dozen different protests. Being innocent, he was speechless until it was too late.

A lantern was thrust into his face at the very outset, and the marks of blood with which he was freely stained gave strength to the charge. When eager hands searched his pockets for the instant it seemed there was proof beyond a doubt.

The roll thrust there by the young sport was easy to recognize, and the outside bills were stained with crimson.

"Hyer, cap, I reckon you got ther best right ter hold these tell we see how ther cat are goin' ter hop. They kim from your ranch, an' a man ez'll pull 'em straight fur a pile like that kin be trusted."

The man who spoke was the one known among the Seven as Bones.

There was a grin on his face, but the men there took no note of it. The proposal hit the popular taste. Bones was speaking one word for Harrington, and another for himself. If these were spoils of war the Sacred Seven would be more apt to get an even share than if every man administered for himself.

"If the crowd wishes I will take charge of it, but if the money was won at the Living Light it belongs to the party who took it away from the table, or some one who may claim under him. It is no longer mine."

"Who said it war?"

The growl came up from an outsider, who would have been glad enough to have been made the depository—and who would have skipped the camp before morning.

"Take it easy, my friend. If no other owner turns up for it there will be a dividend among the crowd, and part of it will come up your way. Now, then, what is the camp going to do about this?"

Short and sharp came the question; and the camp understood what it meant.

Touch-and-Go had handled such cases before, and its vigilantes had made short work of more than one fellow caught red-handed.

How many it had allowed to escape, was another question. When the wrong man committed a crime there, it could be very merciless.

"Thar's on'y one thing fur sich cases. A hemp necktie an' a wooden overcoat!"

"Ett's murder, cl'ar an' simple, an' we ez good ez sced ett."

"What's ther use ter waste time with Jedge Lynch. Hyer's ther corpse, an' thar's ther man with er knife. Jest elerate him an' say no more about ett."

"That's right. He's killed his man."

"An' that man busted Hank Harrington's faro bank."

When every one was voting the man who had grumbled before put in a word now, and it was hard to say whether he spoke in derision or wanted to add fuel to the flames.

His sarcasm, if such it was, passed without notice. Harrington once more came to the front.

"There can be no doubt as to what he has done; and there seems to be no difference of opinion about our duty. If any one objects let him speak out. If he don't do it now he shoulders his share of the work."

This time there was an ominous silence.

"Enough. There is not an objecting voice. Carry the body to the Traveller's Rest, and call out any of the boys you find there. Tell them to gather at the Hangman's Pine, and to come quick," was the command.

The Hangman's Pine was a spot well known to Touch-and-Go.

Half a dozen executions had taken place there, and a noosed rope always hung ready for the next victim. When a summons came to meet there, the citizens knew the meaning of it.

Several men stepped forward and raised the body from the snow, where it had been suffered to sink. One of them turned to Harrington.

"Mebbe Johnny won't want sich a lodger," remarked one of them.

"Ef he don't, jest what shell we say?"

"Tell him I pay the freight. If that don't go, I'll want to know why. Off with you!"

The men moved away with the stiffening body, while Clarence Clark was dragged off, still unresisting, though something like understanding was beginning to come into his face.

In under the pines the snow lay lighter—some places it did not show at all. Several torches were gathered up, and by their flaring light they came to the pine, and from the first tough limb dangled the ready noose.

"Reckon we better wait tell ther crowd hez time ter gether," suggested Davy Jones, the man who had already offered several suggestions that had grated harshly on the ears of the self-appointed overseer of the job.

"Wile he lingers he might be tellin' us all about it. Most fellers hez suthin' ter say ter make ett interestin', an' we ought ter give him ther chance."

"We know all he can tell us, and probably a good deal more than he will. If he is guilty swing him off and be done with it. This is duty and not play."

Harrington was at the front, and stepped forward to lay his hand on the noose. When there was a public movement in Touch-and-Go he could always be depended on to do his full share.

The men with the torches stood near, along with a few others, whilst in the background was the crowd. For once, what the king-pin of the Living Light had to say did not go. The men of Touch-and-Go were not to be balked of their show; and they meant to have the programme as full as possible.

"Speech!"

"Let's hear how he did it."

"Make him confess!"

A dozen were shouting, and even Hank Harrington's splendid nerve was a trifle shaken as he saw the young man draw himself up as though in answer to the calls.

It was not his cue to allow the explanation Clarence Clark might make.

"All ready, you at the other end of the rope?" he exclaimed; and back came the answer, from the spot where Reddy Pete and several others were holding on to the cord, where it dangled from the tree.

"You bet! Fix yer noose an' we'll yank him ter kingdom come in great shape."

"An' ther man ez pulls on ther rope tell ther boy hez a chance ter chirrup dies!" yelled back Jones, pushing forward.

"Cover him," said Harrington, coldly; and at the word Jones heard an ominous clicking which told him to beware.

It was not well to defy the boss of Touch-and-Go.

"As for this little chap—reckon his time has come."

But Clark had at last recovered his wits.

He knew there was no chance for escape, but he did have a last word to say, and, springing back from under the noose, he faced them all.

"Men of Touch-and-Go—if there are any! You think you are hanging me because I stabbed Madge Lee. It is a lie! I was her friend till death. You are lynching me because Hank Harrington dares not have me live. When you have followed the trail of the men who did do the crime, you will find it leads to his door."

Harrington would have leaped upon him, but it might be better to have him say his worst than to kill him just now, with what he had said on his lips.

As for the crowd, the most of them began to feel mystified.

What was this about Madge Lee? They knew nothing about any woman, and curiosity drove them harder than Hank Harrington held them back.

"That's right, lad," encouraged Jones. "Tell us all about it. Touch-and-Go don't want ter go off ther trigger too quick. She's did that once er twice too of'en a'ready."

With a little more time to work up the sentiment the impromptu court might have been willing to suspend its sentence for a time, at least, but on the one side there was but one who was outspoken, and on the other side there were many.

"We've heard enough!" yelled Bones, and a dozen echoed his shout with:

"That's so. Kill him! Kill ther long-haired leetle murderer!"

Defiance sparkled in Clarence's eyes, and he drew himself up straighter than ever.

He raised from his head the shock of yellow hair which he had trusted to as his chief disguise, tore open the breast of his shirt, and stood before them, fierce and defiant.

"Yes; kill me! Shoot me here as you did Muriel! You, Hank Harrington, and you others of the Sacred Seven, kill me now; for if you don't by the sacred heavens, I'll live to search you out and slaughter you all!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FALL OF THE TRAP.

Some time after the young sport had entered into his successful game at the Living Light, a man moved up to the neighborhood and took his station at the corner of a vacant shanty in the rear of the building.

He came as silent as a shadow, and remained at his post mute, motionless, but on the alert.

He was so placed he could command two windows, the one of which allowed a flood of light to stream out from the card saloon.

The other was darkened by a curtain, around the edges of which was a feeble line of light, scarcely above a glow. The lamp burning in the room beyond was turned down to a mere glimmer.

The watcher knew the room, however, and that it was the one which Myrtle, the feminine dealer at the Living Light, claimed for her own.

At present she was occupied at the table; but for all that the watcher placed his attention there from time to time, turning his eyes away from the saloon for the moment, as though expecting the apartment to receive a visitor.

In this he was not mistaken.

When Harrington took the box, to deal against the wonderful winner, Myrtle stood for a few moments at his shoulder.

When she saw the game moving along without any apparent hitch, she turned and glided away. There was a rear door by which she came and went, and through this she passed out into the night.

The watcher's eye was caught by the gleam of light which darted out through the open door, and for the first time turned his head.

Framed in the doorway he saw the figure of Myrtle, as for a moment she paused to peer out into the night.

Then, as he saw her come down from the step and go around toward the private door of her living apartments, he rapidly, though stealthily, approached the spot.

So swiftly did he move that he was almost at her heels when she entered, and had she turned about, for a final

glance at the street, she could hardly have helped but see him.

The latch closed with a snap, but there was no second click of a bolt. The way was open for him, and he did not hesitate.

With a steady hand he lifted the latch, thrust the door open, carefully, but so swiftly there was no creak to give notice of his coming, and stepped over the threshold, closing the door behind him.

The woman had thrown herself into a chair in front of the stove, without removing her hat and mask, or even turning up the light, which shone dimly from the farther corner of the room.

Evidently she was lost in thought; and, judging from the sigh which came from her lips, her reflections were by no means pleasant.

Whatever they were, they were rudely broken in upon by a hand placed upon her shoulder.

"Not a word above your breath, not a sound that can be heard without, or it will be the worse for you. I have come to have a little conversation with you, and I do not propose that we be interrupted."

There seemed little danger of any outbreak through fear.

Unexpected though it had been, the touch of the hand on her shoulder scarcely caused her to start, and she looked up and around with a cool deliberation that spoke well for her nerves.

"Thank you, Ralph Royston, I am not one of the screaming kind. I generally calculate on being able to protect myself; and will not be apt to call for aid. If it should come, it would go hard with you, for Touch-and-Go has decreed you an outlaw, and promised you a short shrift if found again within its borders. It must have been something wonderfully important which led you to run the risk."

"Nothing more important than to see you—though I can well believe you would gladly have spared the interview."

"Rather. I am supposed to be finical about my acquaintances; and a convicted and condemned outlaw is hardly the man I would hold a tryst with had I a choice in the matter."

"But you have no choice."

"I am not so sure of that. I fancy that if I chose this interview would be brought to an end in short order. Now you are here, I am a trifle curious to know what it can be you have to say. Speak up, man. What is it you want from me?"

"Justice."

"Have you not had enough of that? You have been condemned; and if not yet executed it is only because the camp has not been able to do it. Do you expect me to handle the rope?"

She spoke with a scorn which seemed intended to anger, but Royston went on in the same steady manner.

"I speak to you because you have been back of it all. It lies in your power to undo the mischief you have done, and I give you one chance. If you throw it away it may never return."

"You are mad! What are the judgments of Touch-and-Go to me? Whether they hang you or let you go is all the same. Did I stop stages, or rob my friends? Or, did I give witness the crime was yours?"

"Perhaps not, though of even that I am not so well assured. And yet, your hand can be traced through it all."

"Humph! In all this town there is no one who would be so merciful to you as I. If I shot you before you could repeat the insult, to the last man the people here would rise up and say I had done

the right thing. The wonder is I do not try it on."

"What is the verdict of Touch-and-Go to me? It is false as that other verdict, rendered half a dozen years ago, which drove an innocent man out, heart-broken and despairing, and wrecked three lives, if not four. That is that one I wish reversed."

"You are certainly insane to come to me with such talk. I neither understand you, nor do I care to have your words explained. If this is all you have to say to me the sooner you go the better it will be for your safety, while it will profit you nothing to linger. I know nothing of that of which you speak."

"And yet, that is the verdict which is at the bottom of the other. That is the one which really periled my life last night, and which is hunting me down. I have had enough of this work. It must stop. I have been so far on the defensive, but the time has come to carry the war into Africa. Beware, when the campaign opens."

Myrtle remained as cool as ever. In spite of the danger in his tone she neither shrunk from him, nor was angered.

"Your threats, at least, I can understand, and the Harringtons are the wrong people before whom they can be aired. We can meet threats with threats, force with force, and if need be you will never go out of this place alive."

Her hands still lay idly in her lap, and there was nothing to tell that she meant a movement, yet the man was suspicious. He watched her keenly as she spoke; had her fingers strayed ever so little toward any spot where they might close on a hidden weapon his grip would have been on her.

"The crimes of the Sacred Seven have been placed on my shoulders, and I have borne them with a laugh. Beyond Touch-and-Go the accusation would not have the weight of a feather. Before long it may rise up at the real criminals. If it has not done so already, it is because it was possible I might find use for their leader."

"Well?"

"Well, the time for forbearance has about passed. Draw off the dogs on the trail, and do me justice."

"If not?"

"The time has come for a fight to a finish."

"Then it is about time for you to retire."

Against any visible movement he might have guarded; but Myrtle sat as motionless as ever. So it seemed in appearance, but her hidden foot pressed hard upon a spring in the floor, and swift as thought a trap door dropped away from under him.

Ralph felt himself falling and clutched at the woman.

He was too late.

She sprung away like a flash, and his hands only grasped the chair in which she had been sitting.

In one way, the movement was unfortunate; in another, it was his salvation. He was dropping down to the uncertain, but he instinctively held on to the chair, which caught on the edges of the nearest corners of the opening. He hung there, suspended by the grip of the one hand, and the uncertain and frail support above him.

At that instant of danger every sense was on the alert, and after what seemed an age of waiting he heard something, which he knew had been dislodged at the time he fell, strike away down below him. Had he dropped along with it, he could in that moment fancy what would have been the result.

But there was little time to waste in thinking of such things.

He knew at least that it would never do to lose his hold; and it remained to be seen what chance there was above. He turned his face upward, raising himself steadily by the one hand until he could grasp the edge of the aperture with the other.

The situation was desperate enough, yet it seemed more desperate still when he saw Myrtle bending over from above, the lamp in one hand, a revolver in the other.

CHAPTER X.

THE VIGILANTES' VICTIM.

About the ability of the lady to use a weapon there was not the slightest doubt. In fact, Ralph knew it only too well; while Touch-and-Go had received a practical illustration of her skill and nerve on several occasions.

At that distance, and under such circumstances, it was no wonder Royston fancied he was elected for certain death.

Nevertheless, he never faltered, but steadily drew himself upward, as though there was no such person in the world.

The woman was just as cool.

"Just a moment, Mr. Royston. You are aware I can drop a swallow on the wing at twenty yards, so you can imagine what chance you would have with me if I once pulled trigger."

"Do your worst," he gritted back in answer. "If you were a man you would not be living now to make the threat."

"Pardon me. It is no threat, but simply a bit of bald-headed truth. I might say in return, if I did not think you had been badly used, and deserved some recompense, I would not be listening to you. I am anxious to give you a chance for your life. If you are willing to listen to what I have to say, remain as you are for a moment. Any further struggle and I will be compelled to protect myself."

He had raised himself so that his left forearm from the elbow down rested upon the floor. It only required a vigorous effort to be once more in the room, provided nothing was done to hinder. The presence of Myrtle was all that stood between him and safety.

Unfortunately, that was a great deal too much. She had the advantage in position, and he saw she intended to make the most of it, if he did not submit gracefully. He ceased his efforts, and hung suspended over the pit.

"That is better. I will give you a chance, as I said. There are few men to whose word I would trust, but you are one of them. Swear to me to leave this vicinity, and remain forever silent about Harry and the Seven, and I leave you free to retire. Refuse, and you die at once."

"And you have no terms to make for yourself?"

"I need to make none," she answered, proudly.

"If I refuse, then?"

"You die."

"Scarcely."

It was a hundred to one against him, but at that moment he took the one chance—and won.

He was supporting more of his weight on his left arm than Myrtle dreamed of, and his right hand was in the shadow. As he spoke he turned the right wrist silently, the muzzle of a revolver appeared above the level of the floor, and she looked straight into a shoot of flame which burst up toward her.

He followed it himself, leaping suddenly up as she staggered, reeled, and then dropped to the floor like lead. So

swiftly did he move that he caught the lamp as it fell from her hand, and it remained burning.

For an instant he listened, but heard no sound from without, so that it seemed as though no one had taken alarm.

"Let them come, if they want to," he muttered, bending over the fair woman, and touching her forehead lightly with his finger.

"I was afraid I might have bitten deeper than I intended, but her skull is safe, and she will be none the worse for it in the morning. I doubt if I would have cared to insure Hank's life if it had been he at whom I was aiming."

Marvellous though it might have seemed, his wonderful skill with the weapon had enabled him to place his bullet exactly where he wanted it, though it had been a snap shot, taken under the most awkward of positions.

"One thing is certain. They have had their warning with a vengeance, and they will know what they are to expect. One couldn't kill a woman; though it is like trifling with a tiger robbed of her whelps to threaten Harry when she can hear."

He raised her from the floor after the momentary hesitation, placed her comfortably on her couch, and with a last look to be sure he had made no mistake passed out by the door through which he had entered.

He had spent more time in his visit than he knew; and in the saloon matters had been moving along at a rapid gait. He turned his face toward the Living Light; but the game there had closed; and the plucky little sport had taken his departure.

There was a hum of voices, such as was seldom heard about the table when the game was in blast, and he moved up cautiously to obtain a view if possible through the window.

He lost a little time here. It was not possible to obtain a full view of the room from any one standpoint, and once he thought of venturing into the very lair of the tiger.

Finally, he satisfied himself, and turned away, but almost instantly crouched back in the shadow of the building as he heard heavy footsteps.

Several men went by.

Unfortunately, he could not see them, nor the burden they carried; but he heard them talking.

There had been desperate work of some kind, and the vigilantes of Touch-and-Go were again rising.

What that meant he knew well enough; but who was the victim?

He had a horrible suspicion; and knew from a half-finished experience of his own where to look for Hangman's Pine.

Without hesitation he started in that direction.

Harrington seemed to be at the bottom of this movement; and he knew what that might mean.

He saw the flare of torches as he drew near, and heard the subdued roar of a mob. By and by the voice of a single speaker rang above the other sounds, and he recognized it with something like a feeling of relief. He stole up more softly and heard the defiance of the victim and saw the noosed rope and the crowd.

Fortunately, he was able to approach unseen; but he came late. As he dashed forward with noiseless footsteps the vigilantes gave their answer.

First of all, the man known among the Seven as Bones threw up his hand, in swift aim at Clarence Clark.

He was as fair a shot as the best of them, and had he been able to work his will the crowd never would have heard to the end.

Davy Jones was watching, and swiftly he grasped the extended wrist.

"No yer don't, old man. We give him ther chaine ter talk, an' talk he shell. You kin go on with yer cattle stealin', but yer got ter do ett 'cordin' ter skid-ule er bust katridges with Davy Jones."

If he had spoken up fairly and squarely for the prisoners there were men there who would have downed him with a rush.

This way, Davy Jones—who generally threw himself with the minority—won all he was playing for, and something more.

He folded his arms, and listened with grim amusement to that hurled defiance.

Then, he saw what seemed to be the crowd en masse rush forward.

Some one slipped the noose over the throat of the prisoner; there was a shout as Ready Pete and his gang pulled at the end of the rope, and Clarence Clark went swinging into the air.

If another delegation from Touch-and-Go was yet to arrive, it looked as though it would come too late.

Anyhow, it was a horrible sight, for, with his hands and feet free to struggle, it was not to be supposed the youth could keep still. His arms flew up, and he caught the rope with a death grasp. Again Bones made a motion—and this time Davy Jones, who still kept at his elbow, shot out his fist.

Bones went staggering back, and the bullet from his pistol went thudding into the ground at his very feet.

What followed would be hard to describe.

Two or three men, who saw the movement, plunged forward at Davy, while a dozen others, who did not know what was the meaning of the shot, drew their own weapons. In a moment the mob was transformed into a struggling mass.

Harrington alone kept his coolness. He did not intend his victim should escape him, and he was as well satisfied the attention of the crowd was momentarily diverted.

He would have finished the work as Bones had intended to do, but there was an interruption in this case just as decisive as in the other.

From somewhere behind him a knife came hurtling over his head, severing the rope.

As Clarence Clark dropped, Ralph Royston sprung upon the gambler and hurled him to the ground.

"Come!" he shouted, catching Clarence's hand; and, bewildered though the youth might be, the two dashed together into the black darkness of the pines, followed by half a dozen shots from Ready Pete, and the men who had been helping at the farther side of the rope.

CHAPTER XI.

HANK HARRINGTON'S DANGER.

Harrington was up in a moment; but when he glared around on what was left of the crowd found his game had disappeared, and could hear blundering steps in the pines, and voices calling to one another.

"It war Royston," whispered the voice of one of the Seven.

"He jumped so quick ett war hard ter git a glimp' ov him, but I ain't makin' no mistake. He's got ther kid in tow—an' yer knows about how much good et'll be a chasin' him."

"Royston—are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"Great heavens! Then the man cannot know. He would have been at our throats like a tiger."

"Know what?"

The question brought Harrington to his senses.

"Never mind. Perhaps I am wrong—I know you are right. He will glide away like a ghost. The thing has been a failure, and it will be best to call off the boys. If Royston should take the notion, he could make hot work in there for a dozen; and the youngster has nerve enough to be his brother. We'll let them go, if we can; and start fresh when the time is ripe."

He gave a whistle, which seemed to be recognized by more than one, for answers came out from the darkness, and the hunters threw up the game, returning to the tree singly, and by twos and threes.

The gambler spoke with a cold dignity, which might have convinced those who did not know better:

"Men of Touch-and-Go, for once justice has failed you, and a murderer has escaped. His pard is a desperate man, whom we once sentenced to this very tree; and together the two would fight you to the death if they were once cornered. You know that it is not cowardice which makes me advise that for to-night we leave them to their lairs. Better that, though, than waste, or worse than waste, the night."

"Ther night's young, an' we're willin' ter waste a heap ov it. Say ther word, an' we'll foller 'em, ef it's ter death."

Bones spoke up from the crowd, and half a dozen more chimed in to the same effect.

"No, no. In the darkness you would only overrun the trail. To-morrow we can lift it in the snows farther on. Let us go back. First, the funeral of the victim. After that, when daylight comes, vengeance!"

"Vengeance nothin'!" muttered Davy Jones. "When that kims ter Touch-and-Go, ther boot 'll be on t'other foot."

No one seemed to notice his words. Without further parley the crowd made its way toward the camp, leaving the severed noose lying under the branches of the pine, and a twelve-inch bowie sticking in its trunk.

Once back to the town, and Harry Harrington turned his steps toward the Travelers' Rest.

He had ordered the body taken thither, though why he scarcely knew. He thought now it was so he could make sure. It seemed to him Clarence Clark had tried to reveal a secret at which no one but himself had guessed.

A little motion of his hand brought two or three of the Seven to his side. Together they entered the hotel.

Johnny Blaine came forward to meet them.

"A nice looking lodger ye sent me. He'll sleep sound, I'll bet, and not wake the rest with his snoring; but, all the same, I'll have to charge you double freight."

"That's all right. Make your own bill, and I'll see it paid in the morning. Where did you put him?"

"In the little room off the shed. He'll rest well there, and the rats won't bother him, like they did the last one you sent me."

"I want to see him."

"All right; there's a lamp burning; but it's no use. His pockets were inside out when he came."

Harrington knew every room in the house, and needed no guide. He went out into the passage, and could see the light shining through the crack under the door.

He went along with a smooth, steady step, and raised the latch.

The door answered to his touch and swung open. He stood on the threshold and peered within the room.

At the very first a draught of cold air faced him, and he could see on the farther side an open window.

He would have thought nothing of that, for the lamp was shaded from the current of air, and it was the natural thing for him to find.

Only it was raised higher than he expected, and when he looked at the rude bunk in the one corner it was vacant.

That gave him a start, and he sprang across the room, to pick up the lamp and look down at the rough couch.

The body had been there, sure enough, since there were blood stains on the blanket, and a few drops on the floor.

"Curses on it! Can Royston have come back for her—or has the dead come to life? Whichever way it is, there may be lively times soon at Touch-and-Go."

He shook his head as he spoke, and carefully put the lamp back where it had been standing. He would have gone to look out into the night, but at that moment he heard a sound as of footsteps on the snow, and halted, in momentary expectation of he knew not what.

He put his hand to his pistol, but before he could draw it something bounded through the window, and, dropping upon him with terrible weight, hurled him to the floor.

When he looked up he saw the shaggy hide and yawning jaws of Bobo, the wolf.

He knew the ways of the brutes, and that those gleaming fangs, which showed white beyond the savage snarl on his lips, would tear out a jugular at a single snap. And this wolf knew what man was, and would not be cowed or conquered without a fight. He scented blood, and for the moment seemed to have lost every particle of his taming.

Harrington knew his danger, and as his wits were all about him could not imagine a way of escape without the most desperate chances. A paw rested on either arm, pinioning the members so they could not be released without a struggle; and while that was going on tooth and claw would be hard at work.

There was one thing he could try to do. The lamp happened to stand so the light would fall full in his face, and he sought to fix with his the eyes of the wolf.

The attempt was a failure. The glittering optics glanced right past his, and seemed to be looking at something far away, behind him.

While he was thinking all these things Harrington lay as if paralyzed. There appeared to be some occult force at work.

It had only been a short time, but he could almost have sworn he had lain for ages under those paws.

Finally, it seemed as though the time had come for work. Very slowly his courage was returning.

Bobo saw something was coming, and his mouth yawned more than ever. He looked at the vacant bed, and snarled audibly.

Harrington moved uneasily, and Bobo's teeth closed just before they reached his nose. The sudden snap was horribly suggestive.

And yet, the wolf was only considering. He did not know exactly what the situation required, and there was a bare possibility this man was worth more to him living than dead.

That was the way he seemed to think, as he cocked his head up, apparently in deep thought. As Harrington gathered every muscle together preparatory to making one great spring for life, he growled deeply.

The effort came. With a powerful wrench the gambler slipped his arms out from under the paws, and drew up his knees until they almost touched his chin. Then he dashed his feet violently toward Bobo.

Towards Bobo—but they did not strike him. All the force of the blow was wasted on the air. A low whistle sounded without, and the wolf acted as though moved by springs. With a yelp of delight he bounded about, and with one great leap went through the window.

Panting and pale, Harrington sat up. At the point of a knife, or the end of a pistol, he would have faced death without quailing; but there was something too horrible about the mangling and the gnawing of a wild beast's killing.

While he stared at the opening through which Bobo had passed, a face looked in. It was recognized on the instant. Ralph Royston had doubled on his pursuers.

"Murderer!" he exclaimed.

"This last crime has filled the cup of your iniquity. Henceforth look only for retribution. Beware!"

With the swiftness of thought, Harrington threw up his hand and took one of those snap shots for which he was famous, aiming it fairly at the face in the window. It vanished at the report, but he heard a mocking laugh, and footsteps hurrying away.

CHAPTER XII.

BOBO'S TEETH MEET.

When Ralph Royston flung the knife which cut the rope by which Clarence Clark hung suspended, he had intended to follow it up with a fusilade. The time seemed to him to have come when there must be a fight to the bitter end.

Yet, he was averse to taking life, even though it seemed to him it would be but righteous vengeance so far as Hank Harrington and his immediate followers were concerned.

The trouble was, in such a crowd some innocent man might be harmed. When he saw the diversion caused by Davy Jones his mind was fully made up, and he reserved his revolvers for the time only of the bitterest need.

He knew well enough that if Clarence was able to follow him, and the two could once get into the darkness of the pines, the chances were a dozen to one they could elude them all. He knew the way through the timber; was fleet of foot; and had tested his young friend already without finding him wanting.

He kept straight on, at full speed. The pursuers blundered, and wasted time and strength in uncertain efforts, so the fugitives outstripped them, two feet to one, and before long had moderated their pace to a walk.

Then Royston took time to ask the meaning of the scene—though he believed it was backed by a scheme of the gambler to remove Clark from his path.

Without attempting to soften the story Clarence told what had happened.

Royston heard with no sound save a grinding of the teeth, and abruptly changed his course.

He was outflanking the vigilantes, and steering straight for Touch-and-Go.

It was possible for them to get fairly within the town before there was a chance of being seen; and near the camp Ralph for the first time halted, and spoke:

"Touch-and-Go will be no safe place for you, no matter what object you may have in view. Follow yonder gulch and its course, and you will come upon the trail for Walnut Bar. Follow it without halting—at least, till you come to the cabin to which I took you first when I saved

you from the storm. It may be that we will never meet again. If we do, it will be time enough to tell you my story, which will not be finished until all of this night's work is paid for."

"Pardon me, but I cannot go; I will not leave you. I understand your errand and I am with you until it is accomplished."

"Come, then. It is a yes or a no with me, and there is no time to argue."

They knew where to look for the body, and stole silently toward the Traveler's Rest.

The open window attracted their attention, and, looking in, Ralph saw a figure on the bunk, which he recognized.

At the same time there was a slight movement, as though of one awakening from a swoon. With a low cry of delight, Ralph bounded into the room.

"She lives! She lives!" he muttered to himself, as he swiftly examined what had been the seeming corpse.

"Ah! this blow knocked her senseless. The knife-thrust only drew blood, but made no dangerous wound. It has been but a swoon, and Hank Harrington has been fooled again."

A low murmur reached his ears, but he did not stop to hear. Hastily he wrapped a quilt around the now moving form, and gathering it to his breast leaped out into the night.

Clarence had seen and heard enough to understand the situation. He asked no questions, but between them they bore the body away. There was no certainty how soon the disappearance would be discovered, and a search made.

When they had reached a fair offing their burden suddenly slipped away from between them and stood upright, laughing after a shaky but very lifelike fashion.

"It was a close call, sure enough, but I am as good as half a dozen dead women yet. Let me try my strength a trifle, if you please. I think I can walk alone."

"Do not think of it. You are weaker than you know; and we must be far away from here by morning if we would find safety."

"Better for me to hide right here. We have a friend or two at Touch-and-Go, and I am not afraid to risk myself with them. If you burden yourself with me the end will be they will take us all."

"Perhaps you are right. We will try it. First of all, tell me what happened to you, and how. Then we will hide you away. After that—perhaps the work is not yet done for the night."

There was a hint in that, yet the disguised Madge asked no questions, but told briefly the history of her adventures.

She had not recognized the men who attacked her, and was only certain that neither of them was Hank Harrington. From the time she fell from a crashing blow until she awoke in the Traveler's Rest, she knew nothing; and it did not seem necessary to tell her the story of Clarence Clark's narrow escape. They silently and swiftly sought the cabin in which Madge expected to find refuge, and though Davy Jones had not as yet returned they left her there.

"There is work to do in Touch-and-Go to-night," said Royston, as they turned away.

"If it can be done, I must learn who it was robbed, and would have murdered, Madge."

This was the way it happened he returned to the hotel, and by his coming possibly saved Hank Harrington's life. When he rejoined Clarence, Bobo was at his heels, and was once more a wolf of amiable nature and correct habits.

"Come," Royston said; "we will seek the place where they met her. It was my fault she fell into the danger. I should not have let her get out of my reach."

They were fortunate in not meeting any of the men of Touch-and-Go, and with Clarence for guide it was not hard to find the spot.

There was a carpeting of snow on the ground, and by daylight it might have been possible to follow the trail left by the robbers; but, though they could make it out for some little distance, it was soon tangled up in the marks made by many other feet. Clark imagined further search was useless.

Royston knew better. He spoke to the wolf, and as he spoke pointed out the trail.

"Here, Bobo, take it. Follow, old fellow. You can spot them if you will. Search them out."

The animal put its head down and gave a low yelp, sniffing anxiously for a moment. After that, with its head up, it trotted steadily along until it came to where Royston himself had lost the trail.

Here, for a little, he was at fault, but with only a trifling hesitation he began to circle around the spot. Once, he started in the direction of Hangman's Pine; but almost immediately turned, sniffed again at the trail, and trotted faster and faster toward the town.

The two followed him at the best pace they could assume, but that hungry swinging trot was more than they could keep up with, and soon they began to drop behind.

Ralph would have called him back, but the animal was now too excited to come to heel. He increased his speed, and finally was lost to sight, while Royston and Clarence stood in the distance, looking eagerly at the spot where he had melted from view.

"Heaven have mercy on them if he comes upon them unawares. I have started him as if for blood, and if he sees his chance he will not stop until he has taken it."

"They are desperate men, and it may be they will kill him. It is a pity you could not call him off."

"Trust him for that. His taming has unlearned him nothing. He has the intelligence and the power of a demon. Hark! Did you not hear a shout?"

It was, indeed, a distant cry which reached their ears, but it was not repeated. Had they been nearer they might have seen two men separating, one of them entering a cabin, while the other strode on.

This last was the member of the Sacred Seven known as Hyena; and against him, a trifle later, Bobo launched himself.

There was that one cry, an angry snap as the beast rose up, head to throat; then Bobo went galloping back, a stain of blood on his lips, while the man lay in a ghastly heap, with the snow rapidly reddening under his torn neck.

CHAPTER XIII. TWO AVENGERS.

Other ears than theirs might have heard the cry, and they did not make any effort to learn more of Bobo's vengeance. Straight back they went, to the cabin where they had left Madge, and fortunately it was on the outskirts of the place.

Davy Jones had returned, and did not seem at all put out concerning the intrusion made during his absence. He greeted Ralph like an old friend, and urged him to remain for the night.

Ralph shook his head. All he asked

was security for the girl, who was not yet fit to take the journey to the mountain, though her strength had largely returned.

He had other plans in view; and Clarence was but too willing to leave the town, for the time at least.

Good luck went with them, and, unobserved, they dropped Touch-and-Go behind them.

But away up the trail Ralph turned and shook his clenched fist at the camp.

"There are less honest men there than there were in Sodom, and it would seem but just if it received Sodom's fate. Of them all, Jones is the only man I would trust; though there are a few who are not altogether conscienceless. I would never have left Madge behind if I had not thought the danger with me would be even more. To-morrow all Touch-and-Go will be on my trail."

"Are they all at the beck and nod of Harrington?"

"Nearly. Those who have never been linked with him in crime acknowledge him as a leading spirit."

"And he is determined to have your life."

"You saw that up yonder in the hills, when he and the Seven came out to attack me in my stronghold."

"What reason has he?"

"It is a long story, and one there is not time to tell in full. I mean you to take the road to Walnut Bar to-night. The risk to remain with me is too great."

"Never. Your enemy is also mine. You have stood by me in my hours of danger—I swear I will not desert you. It was through no doubt of you that I asked the question. If you prefer, let the answer remain unsaid."

"Nor is it through any doubt of you that I have not explained it all."

"I have a double claim for vengeance against Hank Harrington; and yet, I have been loth to take it. You understand that we had met years before Touch-and-Go was thought of?"

"So I imagined."

"He was a clerk in my uncle's banking house, in which I also was employed. With almost Satanic skill, he ferreted out a defalcation of the old cashier—and managed to place it to my credit. He gave apparent evidence that I had been living a wild and reckless life in spite of my seeming steadiness, aided all the time by a woman who was the wife of another—a man who had been, and was, a friend of mine."

"The woman who now passes for his wife?"

"Yes. My suspicions had been aroused; they knew it, and took means to rid themselves of me. At the same time I was drawn into a seeming quarrel with a man I had always considered my friend."

"I struck him down, and they told me I had killed him, and urged me to fly."

"And you consented?"

"I did, like the utter fool I was. I believed the stuff Harrington told me, and retired, expecting to return when the first burst of excitement was over."

"I had never even harmed the stool pigeon, and when I saw the papers of the next day—it was weeks afterward that I got them—I found I was branded as a criminal, and a net woven around me such as I could not break unless Harrington or the woman should make confession."

"It was too late to go back, and I came farther West."

"For some years I had ups and downs, but at last my half-sister joined me here, and I made a strike which would have netted me a fortune."

"It was then I recognized Harrington, who had managed to drift here. He had remained with my uncle for a year, and then had fled with Myrtle, though he left a clean record at the bank.

"Once more he put his wits to work, though this time he meant to have his profit out of it, all the same. He accused me of being the chief of the Sacred Seven, a band of road-agents concerning whom you appear to be posted. One of the few good men of the place had been murdered by them, and they manufactured evidence first, and condemned me to the rope afterward.

"I escaped, and posted word in Touch-and-Go that any man I found jumping my claim would suffer, and that I would never leave the vicinity until I had proved my innocence, and brought home the crime to the guilty.

"How they have hunted me since then is part of the history of the camp. Tomorrow, I believe, they will make one more effort—I have half decided it shall be their last. I pleaded with Myrtle this night, as I never expected to with a living being, and her answer was an attempt to slay me. You know who I am—practically a proscribed outlaw. Leave me if you are wise. Here our trails should fork. Harrington has hardly done you such wrong as he has to me. He is mine. Leave him in my hands. One day you will learn what I have done with him."

"He belongs no less to me and I refuse to leave you. You are not his only victim. I had a sister once; and she died by his hand."

"Your sister!"

"Yes. Not that it was her life he sought; but she stood between, and caught the bullet intended for her husband. They, too, had made a find, had gathered a "pocket," and in another day would have left the accursed region, but the Sacred Seven found them out."

"And killed him?"

"Hung him over his own doorstone."

"And you are her brother? I have heard of this before. It happened before they came to Touch-and-Go, and was one of the crimes I came across when I was searching up the record of the men after they drove me out."

"I ferreted it out, too, and, though long on the trail, I vowed vengeance would come at last."

"Yes; and Hank Harrington knows it. He has recognized you, having no doubt heard of you from some of his spies. He does not mean you to live to carry out the threat."

"In that very way he is playing into my hands. After this lapse of time I could hardly shoot him down in cold blood; while with an even chance and his skill with weapons he would certainly have the chance to get the better of me. But, if he comes to the attack of his own free will, I think I can hold very straight. When he goes back to Touch-and-Go it will be feet foremost."

"So be it. We both have had wrongs—if Touch-and-Go comes out, perhaps we can right them in the morning. I have turned the other cheek for the last

in wait for him, and while Bobo worried Ralph might shoot.

He made his way back to the front of the house, and gave the alarm after his own cool fashion.

He did not think it worth while to say anything about the way he had been worsted, but he announced that the supposed corpse was gone, and that Ralph Royston was prowling outside, and probably had a hand in the taking.

Then he went on out himself, but not to waste time in search for the man he believed was by this time far enough away.

He smiled to himself as he thought of the folly which had spared him, and was deciding—as Royston had prophesied—that the morrow would bring an end to the hunt. He wished now he had finished it up in the mountains; but they were unprepared for a long hunt, and it might have taken more days than one to run the outlawed man to his last ditch.

This time they would be ready for the chase, if it lasted for a week.

He intended to pass the word around that night, but first he went in to see Myrtle.

He found her seated by the fire, and saw at a glance she had been moved by some excitement. As he entered she exclaimed:

"I have had a visitor."

"Ah! I can guess."

"It was Royston. He demands confession—to be cleaned of the old charges. Then, if we draw off from the trail here, he would offer a truce."

"I can guess at your answer."

"I answered him with the trap, over which he happened to be standing; and would have finished with the revolver. He escaped them both."

"And spared you, after all?"

"Yes."

"The fool. He held my life, too, this evening, in the hollow of his hand, but refused to strike."

"He is in earnest, now. I doubt if he would do it again."

"No. Nor will he have the chance. He has our secret, and has good cause to hate. While he lives we can never be safe. He has foiled us more than once, but we will take the trail and run him down."

Myrtle looked up at him, shuddered, but said nothing.

"Your boy was a woman, and the woman was Ralph's sister, the Girl Sport. Like him, she seems to bear a charmed life. Twice within the twenty-four hours I have thought her dead. Each time she returned to life. What happened to her will scarcely make him feel kinder to Touch-and-Go. She broke the bank on a square deal; and then was robbed, and well nigh murdered."

"Not by your hand!"

"No; but it will be fair to suppose he will give it the credit. At least, the wealth came back. I am holding a good share of it for the owner. When it is demanded we shall see. So long."

He went out with a short, low laugh on his lips, and made his way toward the shanty of Bones. He seldom went in that direction, and never openly, but this time he had a fair excuse.

Knocking gently at the door, it flew open, and Bones himself pulled him in.

"Thar—look thar! Ther bloody work hez begun. Thar's ther fu'st one ov ther Seven to go over ther range, an' look how he went."

He pointed at the body which lay stretched on his bunk.

"Ther luck hez turned, an' who's ter go next?"

"The man whom the brute follows and obeys. Those are the marks of the talons of the wolf. How did it happen?"

Briefly the story was told. They had but barely separated when a cry was heard, and Bones rushed out—to find the body almost at the door, while a dark figure bounded away in the distance.

"Enough. I came within an ace of being served the same way. Once more I lay under the infernal paws. Brute and man must die. See the boys tonight; tell them of this, and warn them to be ready in the morning. Best, perhaps, to bring out a few more whom we can trust. Remember, it will be a run to the death."

"His death er ourn. Ef we slip up on it we got ter jump ther camp an' take to ther road ag'in."

"Hard lines, just when we start in to be honest men," sneered Harrington.

"We have waited too long, that's all. The mine will be jumped when we come back, and I fancy there will be wealth enough in that to pay for a little worry and some risks. Be promptly on hand."

"An' who's ter berry him?" pointing to the stiffening figure on the bunk.

"I will arrange to have that done, if we do not return in time for the funeral. See them all; and if possible meet at the Light in an hour. There are a few things to be decided on."

Late though the hour was, the word ran around the camp, and once more the vigilantes of Touch-and-Go gathered for a council.

The Sacred Seven were all there, save one; but they did not take the leading parts. Harrington told his story, of course, but he waited for others to say what was to be done.

He knew well enough what the verdict would be, and would sooner it was pronounced by men with whom he was certainly not in league before he came to the camp.

Davy Jones was there along with the rest, and listened with that same provoking smile of his to the plans which were laid for the morrow. When some one called on him for his opinion he gave it after his own peculiar style.

"I ain't takin' much stock in tryin' ter ketch on with ther man what made ther strike over in 'Wayback Kenyon; but 'pears ter me we orter find what's become ov ther chap ez busted ther bank. Mebbe this Royston kerried him away, thinkin' ter git at his rocks, an' mebbe he went peaceable, an' ov his own free will. While you're lookin' fur ther one, I'll be searchin' fur t'other. Reckon we kin mog along tergether in peace an' comfort."

"An' ef we don't?"

Bones asked the question suspiciously. Jones was an uncertain sort of a fellow, who had never offered a square defiance as yet, but it had always seemed as though some day he was going to give trouble.

"Ef you goes with ther crowd, you'll hev ter do ez ther crowd sez."

"Whenever I don't you kin down me—ef yer kin."

For a little it seemed the two might come to blows, or something more. Harrington spoke up quickly:

"The camp has given the man a fair trial; but if it wants to open up the case again there will be no objection. One thing is certain. He shall not defy us longer, innocent or guilty. No one man shall bluff all Touch-and-Go."

The growl which ran around the crowd showed how much in earnest they were, and Davy Jones said no more. When he went away from the meeting he was aware of the fact that he was followed. If he had attempted to leave the town

CHAPTER XIV.

PEARANCE OF THE GIRL SPORT.

The second time Harrington had been under the paws of the wolf, and the animal had again gone off scot-free, and without doing more damage than that to the gambler's nerve.

Had it not been for Bobo he might have followed keenly on the trail of the man he both feared and hated, but he was not so sure the beast was not lying

that night he would have found a brace of sentinels were waiting for him.

They did not intend he should warn the outlawed man, as they more than half suspected he intended to do.

"Reckon I throwed 'em off," he muttered to himself.

"They'll be waitin' ter see what I'll be doin' outside ov town, an' not be apt ter drop ter what's goin' on inside. All ther same, I'll be with 'em in ther mornin'. Somehow, Hank 'pears ter hev a inklin' ov ther fact I ain't chippin' in on his games jest so freely as he'd like."

He was almost at his own door when he said this, with a chuckle, and at that moment Harrington himself glided to his side.

"Say, old man, you want to go a trifle slow with the boys. I know you are square as a die, but they don't catch on to your style, and, as I heard some of them growl, I just thought I'd see you home. They'll hardly try to crowd you under my wing. If they do, I'll stay with you, and we two could stand off a pretty good-sized gang."

The gambler was as genial as a mild May morning, but Davy was not deceived. There was some other cause. He fancied he knew what Hank's suspicion was.

"Thanks fur nothin'," he said, in a surly tone. "I jest play my hand fur what it's w'uth, an' nary a bluff do I make. Ef I war you, I wouldn't worry."

"Oh, I'm not the sort to do that. All the same, I mean to see you safe into your shanty, and I advise you don't go out again till daylight."

The two spies had closed up, and Jones knew from Hank's tone it was useless to object, unless he meant to bring on the fight right there. He had his hand on his pistol, but he knew he could have a better chance in the cabin. Hank would be separated from the rest, and he could take them in detail. In some way the gambler had come to suspect that Madge was there, but Davy made up his mind she should never fall into his hands.

With thumb to hammer, Jones threw open the door, showing the room beyond, with the lamp still burning.

Harrington sprang to his side, and they both peered in.

The room was empty. Madge had vanished, and left no sign.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEMON OF THE DRIFT.

So far, Touch-and-Go had always been on the aggressive, while the man they had outlawed had done the retreating. There were many of the vigilantes who believed it would continue to be so.

Harrington did not attempt to deceive them, though he had his own reasons for believing this was one of the times when the fugitive would turn at bay should they once begin to crowd him hard.

They started from the Traveler's Rest; and it was not hard to strike the trail near there. There were the tracks of Royston; of the young man who had come so near to being their victim the night before; and mixed up with theirs the marks left by the feet of Bobo.

Fortunately, none of them led toward Davy Jones's cabin—Ralph was too shrewd for that. He stepped carelessly here, and the trail led out into the mountain. He had a dozen lurking places, and the only thing for the party to do was to follow the footprints.

Two dozen men tracking two. It seemed certain they could not lose the trail, and if they once overtook the quarry there could be but one ending to the unequal fight.

Nevertheless, the trail did vanish, as it had done more than once before when the vigilantes had sought to find the man they had made an outcast.

After a time it was seen that Ralph had been proceeding with more and more caution, and presently all traces of his footsteps were lost completely.

After that, it was guesswork for the most part. The regular trail for Walnut Bar was not far away, and more than once some of the men had said that was the line the retreat would follow; but Harrington was not one of them.

He was sure Royston would make good his word, and never suffer himself to be driven out of the region. More likely he was watching them from one of his lurking places; and it was to explore these recesses of the mountains which they knew he had haunted that the party had set out.

As the day advanced, moreover, the sun grew warmer. The snow was disappearing, and a warm wave came sweeping from over the mountain. One of those sudden changes had set in which seem almost miraculous, and which rendered the journey doubly toilsome, since they were prepared for the cold, biting air they had faced on starting out.

It was only when night had come very near, and they were about to camp, that they discovered traces of what might be the fugitive, though the footmarks were so indistinct that the keenest trailer could hardly read them aright.

They were soon lost to sight in the gathering gloom, but the vigilantes hardly cared to follow them far. It was enough to know the day's labor had not been entirely thrown away, and that they were at last closing in on the quarry.

There was but little doubt the fugitives had gone straight on down into the valley. If so, they were in a trap from which it would be hard to escape. The way led into a cul-de-sac, if the knowledge of some of the old prospectors could be trusted. The canyon afforded plenty of hiding places, to be sure, but with time they could be ferreted out, and with daylight to aid them the men of Touch-and-Go could sweep the gulch, and leave no chance for escape.

Across the narrow neck a guard was strung, and of those who slept that night while off duty not one but had the handle of his revolver convenient to his grasp.

With Ralph so nearly cornered, they did not intend to allow him a chance to beat back unnoticed, or without hindrance.

The night passed undisturbed, and with morning the chase was renewed.

Only Davy Jones, who had toiled along with the rest, shook his head and drew back.

"Excuse me. I ain't given ter nerves, but that place down thar gives me ther creeps. When yer ketches him let me know, an' I'll j'ine yer ter see ther fun."

Had he been alone with Hank Harrington and the remnant of the Seven he would most likely have remained there permanently. They had their suspicions, and, good man though he was, he could hardly have fought them all at little more than arm's length, and in the open.

Fortunately, men were there from the camp not ready to go that far, and their presence saved him.

The gambler king stared at him, and then, in a low tone, growled his warning:

"It looks to me all along as though you were backing his hand. I'm watching, and if I see you assist him when the tug comes, down you go, Davy."

"In your mind. If you don't like my style, pull on me now. The boys will see fair play, and I'll take the chances."

It was a defiance that at any other time Harrington would have answered with a shot, even though he knew Davy's hands were in his pockets, and most likely rested on a pair of cocked derringers. Just now, there were too many interests at stake to accept that challenge.

"You'll keep," he hissed, as he turned away. "When this frolic is over you and I'll have another count on that, Davy!"

"And I'll be with you," was the cold answer.

In spite of the slight wound he had received several days before, The Flirter was with the rest. At a sign from the chief he fell back. There was a fair excuse for him, but Davy knew he was with him to watch. If Harrington and his gang came back victorious, a warm future was in store for him in Touch-and-Go.

Progress was slow when the band settled down to work. They swept along through the canyon, examining every yard as they went, though not really expecting to find any sign until they had reached the farther end.

The weather grew warmer; the wind sighing over the gulch had a moisture in its touch that said summer itself had come on the heels of the storm. Some of the vigilantes swung their coats over their arms, but Harrington now and then anxiously scanned the streak of sky to be seen above, and seemingly would have been glad to peer beyond the mountain.

Even the slow work of beating through the cul-de-sac came to an end, at last, and a shout went up as they saw a figure spring up from the top of a huge bowlder, and, after a momentary glance at the semi-circle which was closing in, disappear, apparently into the face of the canyon.

"Holed at last!" yelled Harrington, and fearlessly he pushed on up the precipitous slope, followed by the whole posse.

A yawning opening, hitherto unheard of, met their view.

Half a dozen men would have rushed into this hole, but Harrington held up his hand in warning, and bent forward to listen.

Not far away they could hear the noise of running footsteps, but the tunnel, for such it seemed to be, darkened rapidly, and the fugitive was already beyond reach of the eye.

"Look around for torches!" ordered the leader, once satisfied the game was in its lair.

"Half a dozen of us will root him out, and the rest will stand guard to see he does not double back on us and get off the way he came. Does any one know anything about this shaft?"

"Never heard on ett afore," answered Bones.

"Ef ett war topside ov ther ground I'd say it warn't so much a shaft ez a channel. Most likely ett reaches ter Chiny, fur I ain't seen ov it a-comin' out this side."

"More likely it goes through into Devil's Canyon, and this is the way they made their escape after they tumbled in there. There is a history and a mystery going to be told to-day."

Torch in hand, Harrington led the way, and his own men followed. As they pushed along they peered from side to side at the solid walls, and at the roof of rock overhead. No hiding place could they discover, and they moved faster and faster, sure the game was still ahead, and might at any moment be overtaken.

Still, though the minutes lengthened, and their pace was not slow, they heard nothing and saw nothing, and ahead of them the passage stretched with a regularity that seemed to have been shaped for just such use. It was something of a surprise when it suddenly forked, one arm bearing away to the right.

"Two of you follow that and see what you find," ordered Harrington, who, with the rest, kept straight ahead.

The gloom and utter silence of the place were beginning to tell on the nerves even of the chief, and after a long tramp it was with something of a shiver he suddenly found the passage come to an abrupt end. It looked as though some convulsion of nature had forced a huge mass of rock across the passage, and closed it up forever.

Something like an imprecation left his lips, but at that moment Bones caught him by the shoulder.

"Lis'sen, boss! What are that? Hez Satan broke loose?"

Away off, low, yet distinct, and rapidly rising louder, they heard an infernal howl, as of a million wolves, yapping and yowling along the passage, in a frenzy of terror!

Then, while they listened, the chorus died away into a sullen rumble, under which the very rocks seemed to quiver, and along the passage, though still hidden in the darkness, something same lap-lap-lapping towards them!

CHAPTER XVI. CASHING IN.

The figure which had attracted the attention of the vigilantes was that of Madge.

As the reader knows, she had slipped away from Davy Jones's cabin, during his absence, preferring to find a hiding place which seemed safer.

In her own way she had succeeded in reaching the spot but a little while before, and was resting a few moments when she was alarmed by the approach of Harrington and his party.

She knew from certain signs that Ralph was in advance, and immediately darted into the passage, which was so familiar to her that light and darkness there were almost the same.

When she reached the place where the tunnel forked she knew it by the feel of the flooring, and turned unhesitatingly to the right.

Once more she ran on, increasing her speed as she saw, after a little, a glimmer of light ahead.

"Be careful, Ralph; it is I!" she shouted, as she saw the form of a man bending over, his attention attracted by even the light noise of her swift footsteps.

"Heavens, Madge! Hasten, hasten! There is not a minute to spare."

As he spoke Ralph ran down to meet her.

"They are coming!" the Girl Sport gasped, as she seized his hand, and the two ran side by side.

"Then, heaven help them. The water is coming and they are doomed, for the dam will break."

"The dam! You must be wrong. Two days ago it was frozen."

"So much the worse. I have seen the signs of the storm, and I know the torrent is coming. When it gets here it will be on the top of the ice. If there has been such a cloudburst as I fancy, it will fill the tunnel from end to end, and woe to those who are caught in it."

Together they came out into the daylight. Clarence Clark was gazing toward the upper end of the canyon when Royston caught him by the shoulder.

"This way. Climb for your life. Yonder comes the flood."

Swiftly the three clambered up the rocks by the side of the opening, but with such wonderful speed did the torrent come that they only made their escape in time.

The mouth of the tunnel lay right at the seeming end of the narrow canyon, and had been protected from the little stream which had its course down the centre of the gorge by a heap of debris forming a natural dam.

This turned the water into a still narrower channel, which wound backward until at ordinary times it sufficed to allow the scant stream to drop away through a gateway to a side canyon across which the light-footed Madge could here have leaped.

The hurrying rush of flood water would never stop to worry its way through here when the mouth of the old channel, shaped like a funnel, was waiting to receive it. Doubtless that was the course of the stream, once on a time, and once more the water would find its ancient way.

While the three looked, shivering in spite of themselves, the head of the torrent came down at racing speed, overleaped the low dam, and roared into the passage. It was the last of life for the Sacred Seven. Only one of them—Flirter—was ever seen alive again.

Davy Jones watched the party beating through the cul-de-sac as far as he could see them.

When they had vanished from sight he turned suddenly at the sound of a sharp click, and found he was looking into the muzzle of Flirter's revolver, and that redoubtable desperado looked very much as though he intended to shoot.

The swift look may have caused him to hesitate, but he never altered his aim.

"You got me, Flirter, an' that's a fact."

"An' means ter keep yer. Somehow you's a gittin' in' ther way, more er less, an' by'm'bye you'll be doin' mischief. Reckon you better say good-morning. Ther boss ain't no more use fur you, neither hez I."

"An' yer won't give me a chance?"

"Chance nothin'. I got ther drop."

"Then fire away!"

As he spoke Davy threw himself over backward just as the revolver cracked.

The bullet went hissing over his head, and he rolled over swiftly, expecting another shot. Instead, there was a snarling cry, the noise of a wild beast worrying over stricken game, and looking over his shoulder he saw Bobo hard at work.

"Come off!" he yelled, springing to his feet, and the wolf obeyed without a murmur. He knew Davy of old, and, anyhow, unless he meant to devour the animal it was a snap and a tear, and then away for a new spring.

"Hello, what's 'this?'"

Several of the more honest of the vigilantes were returning on their trail, and they had seen the whole thing.

Davy supported the stricken man as he answered:

"It means that this hyer galoot war one ov ther Sacred Seven—an' his boss warn't the man you bin lookin' fur, by a long shot. He knowed I knowed it, an' he meant ter close my mouth, actin' more like by ther capt'in's orders."

"An' that capt'in war Hank Harrington, an' he's left me here ter be killed, same ez he did Hyena! I won't die, I swar I won't, tell I've told ther truth an' hev him ready ter foller!"

Flirter fairly shrieked out the words, and there was not a man there who in one glance did not get a comprehensive view of the story.

"I b'lieve yer, he's right," muttered one of the men; "but with Hank Harrington ter ther front it mayn't be jest so well fur ter let him know it."

"Listen to me all ther same; an' ef ther time comes you kin know how ter act."

Hyena poured out his story with a voice which rapidly grew weaker, but lasted till the tale was finished.

And then, from the valley below, came a strange, gurgling sound. Had they been near to see it they would have noted the water pouring out of the mountain side, first in a waterfall, which leaped wickedly over the great bowlder, and then, rolling down the narrow valley, rose, and rose, and rose, until a little lake lay beneath them.

Others of the vigilantes made their escape, and when they had waited an hour obtaining farther light on what had happened they made their way back to Touch-and-Go.

Hank Harrington and his men came not, though there was a dry-eyed woman waiting anxiously for them.

Ralph Royston, Clarence Clark, and Madge did.

In some way Davy Jones got word to them, and when they entered Touch-and-Go they were received in amity, if not with open arms. Myrtle told all she knew, and she at least explained the mystery of the affair at the bank, so that Ralph could show himself guiltless. She even told enough to make doubly sure that Harrington had been chief of the outlaw Seven.

Having made this much of amendment, she disposed of her title to the Living Light and went her way.

Ralph was in no such hurry to go. He had made a fair strike in his mine, and waited to watch its development, while Clarence Clark—to whom, and to Davy Jones, interests in that same mine were assigned—waited with him. Clarence was young yet, but Madge, who had played well her role as a shadower, looked with no unfavorable eye on Clarence, and perhaps he cared more for that than for the mine!

At all events, he has no regrets that once upon a time the trail of vengeance led him to the vigilantes of Touch-and-Go.

Of them all, Bobo, the wolf, ran the most danger, for the men of the camp voted him a dangerous brute to be at large, but Royston saved him!

THE END.

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